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**From Public to Private Space:  
The Territorialization of the Poughkeepsie City School District  
And the Four Pillars Charter School**

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Educational Studies

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### **Abstract**

Within the contemporary landscape of public education reform, educational actors are re-directing their hopes and visions for equitable and collaborative change outside of public space and into private territories, such as charter schools. The effort to establish the Four Pillars Charter School in the city of Poughkeepsie, NY is one such example of an education reform initiative that seeks to move further outside and away from traditional democratic and public educational institutions. Through an analytical framework that draws upon neoliberal abandonment, the regime of common sense, the politics of disposability, territory, I examine the overall trajectory of the FPCS efforts—including its origins, motivations, and vision and challenges—in order to argue for a return to and a reinvigoration of democratic and public institutions. Ultimately the FPCS effort represents a call to re-imagine equitable educational experiences for youth in existing PCSD schools, and to critically re-examine and begin to deconstruct the racism and classism that has for so long burdened and territorialized traditional democratic and public educational space within the PCSD.

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## Introduction

The Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD) possesses many of the stereotypical markers of a high needs urban school district—high drop out rates, low test scores, and limited financial resources are just a few among many challenges for administrators, teachers, students and families. The New York State Department of Education has identified Poughkeepsie Middle School and Poughkeepsie High School as among the lowest performing 5 percent of New York State schools, while four of Poughkeepsie’s Elementary Schools fall within the bottom 10 percent of New York State schools (New York State Education Department Office of Accountability). PCSD is also characterized by racial and economic segregation—according to the 2011-12 NYS Report Card, 81 percent of students within the district are students of color, and 91 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In assessing this information, it is important to recognize that these statistics, collected at the state and federal levels, paints a simplistic and monolithic portrait of PCSD. The standards through which schools are characterized are far too narrow—like any other district, the most defining characteristics of PCSD cannot be quantified in neatly packaged statistics and data distribution. However, based upon the statistical information presented, it is clear that PCSD is struggling to meet student needs. For this reason, I was not altogether surprised when I heard of the effort to establish the Four Pillars Charter School (FPCS) as a potential solution to district underachievement and an alternative option for families within the city of Poughkeepsie.

While the effort to establish FPCS did not surprise me given the challenges that the district faces, I was also unsurprised given the expansion of a nationwide charter school movement. Charter schools have rapidly proliferated throughout the urban educational landscape in the United States over the past several decades, significantly transforming the public education

systems of cities such as Chicago, New York City, and New Orleans (Lipman, 2011). Although charter schools still only make up a very small percentage of all public schools, they have doubled in number over the last decade—today there are 5,700 charter schools operating nationwide. (Center for Education Reform, 2013). Advocates have identified charter schools as the answer to problems caused by the bureaucratic confines of the traditional public school system—problems such as underachievement, ineffective teaching practices, and faulty administration. As advocates argue, the autonomy and accountability systems through which charter school operate allow for greater educational innovation in regards to pedagogies, management styles, hiring practices, and other school characteristics (Weil 2000, Wells 1998). The market-based, competition-oriented logic of charter school advocates is located on one end of an often polarizing and controversial debate regarding the benefits and disadvantages of charter schools. Charter school opponents occupy the opposite end, and generally argue that charter schools are a means towards satisfying corporate interests, destabilizing traditional public schools, and reinforcing race and class based inequities (Orfield, 2010; Weil, 2000). Certainly, there are many educational actors who fall in between either end of this debate, especially given the fact that charter schools and charter school networks vary widely in terms of management, funding, size and vision (Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

The charter school debate typically revolves around the following questions: Do charter schools produce greater academic achievement amongst students in struggling school districts and communities? Do charter schools produce and reinforce greater educational inequity along race and class lines, and if so how? However, as the charter school movement increasingly occupies greater space on the national stage, I believe these questions are limited in two respects. First, to posit that all charter schools operate or fail to operate in a singular fashion does not take



into account the widely varied contexts in which charter schools exist. Second, I argue that it is important to first put forth the following question for a critical understanding of the contemporary charter school movement: Why are current education reform initiatives moving further outside and away from democratic and public institutions in order to create positive and equitable change, particularly in low-income urban communities of color? Why do the Four Pillars Charter School founding group members feel that it is important to create a new educational territory within the city of Poughkeepsie that is autonomous of the PCSD?

This thesis will address these critical questions through a sociopolitical discussion and analysis of the histories and current circumstances of Poughkeepsie and the PCSD. This analysis reveals the ways in which Poughkeepsie and the PCSD have become territorialized spaces through the efforts of middle class white residents and, more significantly, the structural racism and classism operating within the neoliberal abandonment of public institutions and traditional public schools. Furthermore, this analysis will demonstrate how this process of neoliberal abandonment simultaneously regards low-income black and Latino communities as disposable within the neoliberal social order, while denying these communities the right to democratic participation, collaboration, and action. I will also discuss how this denial forces educators and communities to re-direct their hopes for better educational opportunities out of the public sphere and into private territories, as well as the inherent contradictions and challenges that this re-direction presents. Ultimately, I argue that the story of the Four Pillars Charter School effort signifies a call to de-territorialize educational space and to authentically restore the “right to the city” by returning to and authentically radicalizing traditional public education. Only when the community returns to the traditional democratic and public institutions can there be true

possibility for confronting and dismantling the structural racism and classism that has territorialized Poughkeepsie's schools.

My goal in addressing the aforementioned topics is not to construct an argument that is either in support of or against charter schools. Instead, I try to disentangle the nuanced origins and particular conditions under which the FPCS effort has emerged. As a witness to this complex process, I have been challenged and inspired by the thoughtful and concerted visions and efforts of the dedicated team behind the FPCS effort, a team whose ultimate goal is to better support all youth within the city of Poughkeepsie. Furthermore, I strive to bring an intentional awareness around the fact that my research methods, data, analysis and conclusions are shaped by my positionality as a racially and socioeconomically privileged Vassar College student who is approaching this subject from outside of the city of Poughkeepsie community.

## **Method**

I utilize a variety of qualitative research methods. I collected the bulk of my data from a series of in-depth, recorded and transcribed interviews that I conducted with six out of the nine members of the FPCS founding group: Frank Mulhern, Dwight Paine, Allison Withers, Kadiyah Omnae Lodge, Carmen McGill, and Jane Ebaugh. I have also interviewed city of Poughkeepsie community member and former PCSD school board president, Dr. Edward Pittman, for a first hand historical perspective on the district. My discussion, analysis, and conclusions regarding the FPCS effort draw most heavily from the data collected in these interviews. Beyond interviews, I have closely consulted FPCS application documents, the FPCS official website, and the FPCS Facebook page. As the research question for my thesis is centered on the motivations of the founder to create the FPCS, I feel that it is important if not absolutely necessary to highlight the voices and those documents that directly reflect the voices of the founding group members

themselves. I have also consulted the PCSD website, including the “District History,” and school board documents. Furthermore, I have drawn on various media from the Poughkeepsie Journal, such as interviews and articles regarding PCSD news, as well as academic scholarship that chronicles the history of Poughkeepsie and its public schools.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first is a review of the literature relevant to the guiding question of my research. This literature review includes an overview of the neoliberal discourse against traditional public schools, a discussion of the politics of disposability, introduces the concepts of territory and territorialities, and analyses how these systemic forces intersect within today’s burgeoning charter school movement. The second chapter addresses the history and origins of Poughkeepsie and PCSD as sites of multi-scale territorialization at the city, district and individual school levels. The third chapter covers the history of the Circle of Courage Learning Center (CCLC) as among the first district-led projects to address educational challenges beyond traditional public schools—in other words, the first effort to create a new educational territory with a de-territorialized vision. This third chapter also explains the critical role that the CCLC has played in shaping the FPCS effort. The fourth chapter details the FPCS effort as the first initiative within the city of Poughkeepsie to seek educational autonomy outside of the PCSD. This chapter will also include a discussion of the challenges that the founding group has encountered, and why those challenges have prevented the successful growth of the FPCS effort. Finally, the fifth chapter provides an overarching analysis of the way in which the PCSD history, the CCLC, and the origins, motivations, and vision and challenges of the FPCS effort reveal how educational spaces cannot be de-territorialized through further territorialization. Instead, I suggest that in order to create positive, equitable, and collaborative change for youth in underserved public school districts, educational

actors must resist territoriality and return to and radically reinvigorate traditional democratic and public institutions.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Literature Review: The Intersections of Neoliberalism, The Politics of Disposability, and Territory in the Contemporary Charter School Movement**

I have identified three principal concepts as foundational to a contextual discussion and analysis of the Four Pillars Charter School effort: neoliberalism, the politics of disposability, and territory. In identifying these foundational concepts, I have drawn heavily from the work of Pauline Lipman, Henry Giroux, and David Delaney. I will make reference to these concepts throughout my discussion and analysis of the FPCS effort and in exploring the question as to why the founders feel that it is important to create a new educational territory that is not controlled by PCSD in the same ways that its traditional public schools are. This literature will therefore touch on the significance of each concept, and discuss how these concepts intersect and relate to the larger charter school movement in today's system of public education.

#### **Neoliberalism and Public Abandonment**

Over the course of the past 30 years, our global society has existed within and operated under the influence and control of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). Educational scholar Pauline Lipman defines neoliberalism as a collection of “economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in cost of labor and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (2011, p. 6). Through a pervasive and insidious attack on the welfare state, on public institutions and on those they serve, neoliberalism has generated a new discourse that underpins every social, political and economic interaction in today's contemporary world. The discourse of neoliberalism equates freedom with “radical individualism, privatization and de-regulation” (Giroux, 2013, p. 21). This discourse produces a violation of the “social contract,” which refers

to the state's responsibility to provide minimum guarantees of security to its citizens. In turn, this violation results in an overall "perverted sense of citizenship" amongst the public, which is seated not in the possibility of creating radical, collective change, but in consumerism and hyper-individuality (Giroux, 2010, p. 24).

Neoliberal discourse has widely proliferated and shaped the landscape of contemporary public education. In a general sense, neoliberalism does not invest in nor protect traditional public schools as sites of democracy. Instead neoliberalism invests in private endeavors while anticipating the slow and complex deterioration of democratic public schools. This phenomenon refers to this dual-process as "roll back" and "roll out" neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002). The foundational principles of the neoliberal discourse that facilitates roll back and roll out neoliberalism within public education are as follows: first, that educational institutions should support the development of human capital for a global market; second, that public institutions are unfit to support educational innovation; and third, that free-market standards such as competition and choice must be prioritized in order to create stronger schools with higher achievement outcomes. Through these foundational principles, families are positioned as educational consumers, teachers are positioned as rivals, districts and schools compete for federal and state allocated resources, and traditional public schools are abandoned as sites of democracy, community collaboration, and collective justice.

### **The Politics of Disposability**

The neoliberal abandonment of traditional public schools produces what cultural critic and theorist Henry Giroux identifies as the "politics of disposability." The politics of disposability refer to the ways in which neoliberal abandonment positions socially, politically, and economically marginalized groups—those who those who most often rely upon public

institutions—as the “waste of the neoliberal social order” (Giroux, 2013). In this way, the politics of disposability are inherently tied to systemic racism and classism. For example, neoliberal abandonment frames low-income youth of color as “problems” to be solved, rather than as agents of change who possess the power, knowledge and potential to collectively solve problems themselves. In framing low-income youth of color as problematic, they become hyper-disciplined, pathologized, and dehumanized. Furthermore they become disposable, and are increasingly pushed out of public spaces and into private spaces such as prisons and discharge centers (Fabricant & Fine 2012).

Through the politics of disposability, the source of social issues becomes located in the faults of individuals, and not in the denigration of social responsibility. As Giroux explains,

The consequences [of neoliberalism] involve not only the undoing of social bonds and the dismissal of shared responsibilities but also the endless reproduction of the much-narrowed registers of character and individual self-reliance as substitutes for any rigorous analyses of the politics, ideologies, and mechanisms of power at work in the construction of socially created problems (2009).

The hyper-individualization of social inequalities and their root causes is visible throughout our contemporary times. For example, welfare recipients have been characterized as lazy thieves who steal the tax dollars of hard working Americans (MSNBC, 2013). Another example could be how a perceived cause of the “achievement gap” between black students and white students is the home life of black youth and the ways that black families fail to prepare their children for school (Thomas, 2013). Hyper-individualized framing of the source of structural social inequalities is perhaps the most violent component of neoliberal abandonment. Hyper-individualization solidifies a perverted rationale that makes it easier to dispose of those marginalized peoples by pushing them deeper still into the margins of society. Furthermore, hyper-individualization makes it so that the neoliberal abandonment of public institutions and the politics of disposability are increasingly more difficult to see through, understand, and resist.

**Territory, Territoriality, and Territorialization**

Succinctly defined, territoriality and territorialization are the processes through which space becomes bound and demarcated along lines of social power in order to communicate a collection of meanings or messages. Territory is the sociopolitical product of territoriality. Important to note is that an enclosed space is not inherently a territory—it is only when a boundary's meaning conveys or implicates social power that an enclosed space becomes a territory. As discussed in geographical scholar David Delaney's *Territory: A Short Introduction*, the socio-politically constructed borders that surround territory “both shape and are shaped by what they contain, and what crosses or is prevented from crossing them” (Anderson & O'Dowd, 2010, p. 594). In other words, a particular territory is dialogically characterized by what is within and also outside of its borders. Furthermore, once one space becomes territorialized, its borders reflexively create a second, “othered” territorialized space.

Territory is typically understood as a “device for simplifying and clarifying something else, such as political authority, cultural identity, individual autonomy or rights” (Delaney, 2005, p. 19). In reality, territory complicates space rather than simplifying it. All territories “reify forms of identity and difference,” resulting in hierarchized and stratified space that produces social conflict (Delaney, 2005, p. 19). Simultaneously, territory “directs attention away from the causes of social conflict,” thus essentially naturalizing the borders and the differences they demarcate between two territories. To see *through* territory is to reveal the complex and nuanced “constellations of social, relational power” and control of resources that are not fixed but alive and in flux through time and space (Delaney, 2005, p.16). Finally, included within an discussion of territoriality and territorialization is the question of “de-territorializaaton.” In a general sense, to de-territorialize space is to equitably re-distribute the concentrations of power that result from territorialization.



The study and theorization of territory and borders is a relatively recent intellectual endeavor that has developed over the course of the past thirty years (Delaney, 2005). Over this time, territory and border theory have been applied across disciplines such as international relations, anthropology, and sociology. However, territory and territoriality also offer a critical socio-spatial framework through which to approach educational policy and sociology. More specifically, these concepts offer a new lens through which to understand the neoliberal restructuring of contemporary public education reform, and the abandonment and disposability of democratic and public institutions and traditional public schools.

### **The Charter School Movement**

Charter schools are manifestations of the ways in which neoliberalism, the politics of disposability, and territory and territoriality intersect and inform each other within contemporary public education. As it is often explained in mainstream media, charter schools are privately managed but publically funded. However, this distinction between the public and the private has become increasingly obscured with the growth of the charter school movement. Charter schools were first developed during the 1980s as “progressive and experimental” alternatives to public education, most often with a foundational vision for social justice. Over the course of the past twenty years, this foundational vision for social justice was co-opted by “philanthropic, corporate, hedge fund and real interests,” resulting in the launch of a nationwide charter school movement. In other words, although the movement began as an alternative within public education, it has generally transformed into an “alternative pitched *against* public education” (Fabricant & Fine, 2012).

This is not to say that all charter schools share a single vision. Today the charter school movement is comprised of a vast multiplicity of educational institutions, which differ in regards

to size, management, funds, admissions practices, and foundational principles. For example, some charter schools are founded as grassroots initiatives by educators, families, and larger communities, while others are managed by for-profit Educational Management Organizations such as the Edison Project or Education Alternatives Inc. As a result of this variety and rapid growth within the movement, it has become increasingly complicated to navigate and make sense of the contemporary landscape of public education reform. However it is important to recognize that regardless of these potential differences, all charter schools are “mainstream public institutions that legitimate and normalize the values underpinning free-market fundamentalism” because they innately contribute to the degradation of democratic and public education and neighborhood schools, as the following analysis of the charter school movement will reveal (Giroux, 2009, p. 27).

The initial vision of the charter school movement was to holistically improve struggling public school districts through what educational scholars have named “innovation contagion” (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 54). The market-based logic of innovation contagion is that innovative practices of charter schools force traditional public schools to compete for resources (e.g. funds allocated per student enrolled). According to the logic of innovation contagion, traditional public schools naturally begin to use more effective pedagogical practices and produce greater outcomes for students and families due to this competitive incentive, resulting in stronger and healthier public school districts as a whole (YongMei & Arsen, 2010). However, a comprehensive analysis of the charter school movement in urban, low income communities of color, such as neighborhoods in New York City, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia demonstrate the failings of the innovation contagion logic (Lipman, 2011; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). In reality, traditional public schools often struggle

to compete within neoliberal spaces where they are under-resourced, under-valued and ultimately under attack nationwide.

As a consequence of free-market policies and the neoliberal abandonment of public institutions, many underserved public schools are forced to close through state or city mandate. It is not a coincidence that there is a strong correlation between the mass closings of public schools in low-income communities of color and the rise of charter schools in those same areas (Lipman, 2011; Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Instead, this correlation is evidence of structural racism that abandons public institutions—especially those that predominantly serve marginalized racial groups—and identifies people of color as disposable, or in some cases as guinea pigs for the experimental restructuring of public education (Lipman, 2011). Students become displaced when their public schools are closed due to underinvestment, lack of support, and the resulting failure on the part of the school to meet student needs (Davis & Oakley, 2013). These students are often transferred out of their neighborhoods and required to travel far distances to attend a different public school in a community that is not their own. As Lipman notes, this removal of a community's neighborhood schools not only has “devastating” effects on the daily lives and educational trajectories of young people, but affects the integrity and preservation of democracy within communities as well (2011, p. 46). Unfortunately, the idea of a neighborhood public school as a community's central “anchor” of democracy has become a relic of a distant past for many low-income families and communities of color throughout the country. Of course, the correlation between the mass-closings of public schools and the rise of charter schools is not to say that charter schools are the sole cause for mass-closings. Public schools close due to a multifaceted process of any city's neoliberal restructuring. However, this correlation is

significant in that it speaks to the partial role that charter schools play in the degradation of the neighborhood school as a site of communal democracy.

Charter schools are also manifestations of the politics of disposability, specifically in terms of the divisions and boundaries they create within as privatized territories cities and districts. As previously explained, territories communicate meaning as they are bounded spaces demarcated along lines of social power. The boundaries surrounding charter schools in low-income urban communities implicitly and/or explicitly communicate to families that the right to strong public education is not available to all children. The right is only available to some—perhaps those equipped with the necessary social and cultural capital to seek out a charter school, or those eventually enrolled after a harrowing lottery process (Sackler, 2010). Today, urban public school systems have become so deeply territorialized that families must navigate the complex and divided terrain of public school districts, individual charter schools, charter school networks, and, for the select few, private schools. As a result, families become the consumers in a territorialized educational landscape constructed through market-based principles of competition and choice. Through this process, the boundaries that surround charter schools demonstrate how charter schools themselves are contradictory nature. Their boundaries are “inherently contradictory” because they at once offer some students protection from struggling public schools, while simultaneously denying other students that same protection (Delaney, 2005, p. 64). Furthermore, while it is true that some extraordinary charter schools are sites of refuge for students living within struggling public school districts, studies reveal that on average, charter schools perform as well as or worse than traditional public schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Thus, the borders surrounding charter schools produce environments of insecurity and anxiety

for families, in which some students are protected and others are shut out and, consequentially, disposed into struggling, underserved public schools (Wells, 1996).

In framing the charter school movement as a product of racist and classist territoriality, it is also important to imagine what de-territorialized educational space might look like within urban public school districts. I use “de-territorialization” to refer to a return to democratic and collective process, a just and equitable re-distribution of power, and to the restoration of the “right to the city.” The right to the city refers to “a right to transform the city, to make it the city we wish to live in, and in the process transform ourselves and how we live together” (Lipman, 2011, p. 5). In terms of education, de-territorialization of educational space would ultimately actualize through the emergence of strong public schools that are available to all district students and committed to actualizing democracy, social justice, and strong academic outcomes.

The process of de-territorializing educational space in contemporary urban communities has become increasingly difficult to due to the declining “public faith in defining institutions of democracy” (Giroux, 2013). This decline is reasonable; it makes sense that the public would lose faith in public institutions when neoliberal policies are put in place in order to directly or indirectly dismantle those public institutions. Thus, this decline in public faith is essentially a product of neoliberalism. Because of the decline, the private sphere has become “the only space in which” the public can “imagine any sense of hope, pleasure, or possibility” (Giroux, 2013). The re-direction of hope from public space into private space is the workings of what Giroux has named the “regime of common sense” (2010, p. 26). A processual tool of neoliberalism, the regime of common sense tells the public that it is not possible to create positive, equitable and collaborative change within or through democratic public institutions. Thus, the impulse to turn to the private sphere becomes naturalized as common sense; the public believes that it must

create or seek out private spaces in which to actualize positive, equitable and authentic change in its community. For example, former president George W. Bush called upon the regime of common sense when he announced the initiation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001: “American children must not be left in persistently dangerous or failing schools,” he explained. “When schools do not teach and will not change, parents and students must have other meaningful options” (Lauen, 2007, p. 462). In his announcement, Bush was not speaking to a reinvestment in public schools, but to a need for choice, educational consumerism, and privatization. Evidence of the regime of common sense is also visible in the strong bipartisan support that charter schools have received over the course of the last decade, most notably within the Obama Administration’s incentive-based policies and initiatives such as Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education). Present in our politics and our every day lives, the regime of common sense has left little space, energy, and resources for resistance from public schools and those they serve. Resistance efforts against privatization and corporate interest are often left undocumented in mainstream media, while the media coverage of exemplary charter school networks proliferate widely, such as through the broadly distributed and critically acclaimed documentary film *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott, 2010). Thus, the regime of common sense becomes further embedded in national consciousness.

Despite the insidious operations of the regime of common sense, there still remains substantial evidence that the American public is divided on its stance on public schools and the privatization of public education. Low-income students and families of color occupy both sides of the charter advocate and charter opponent debate. For example, in April 2014, hundreds of middle and high school students walked out of school and into the streets of Newark, NJ to protest the recent “charter-friendly” One-Newark plan, which includes thousands of public

school teacher layoffs and a collaboration with the Walton Foundation and Teach for America (Moskowitz, 2014). Meanwhile, parents and students from the Harlem Success Academies, a New York City charter school network, traveled to Albany in March 2014 to protest what the media and the Harlem Success Academies founder Eva Moskowitz has framed as NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio's "war on charter schools and minority students" (Carpenter, 2014; Baker & Hernández, 2014). This tension and disagreement gets at the heart of the issue: the reality is that students in low-income public schools are generally underserved, and until the neoliberal politics of disposability are interrupted and dismantled, these students will continue to be underserved.

However, it is critical to ask *why* charter schools are widely seen and understood as the only possible form of refuge from the violence of neoliberalism when they are physical manifestations of that very violence? Why are charter schools seen as the best alternative, if not the *only* alternative to struggling public schools, especially when charter schools educate such a small portion of a city's population and often perform at the same level if not below their public school counterparts? Why and how have traditional public institutions become vilified and pathologized? Locating the neoliberal politics of disposability and territoriality within the charter school movement is not to vilify charter schools as a whole, because charter schools are, as I have demonstrated, vastly diverse and complex. Instead, I establish this framework in order to understand why educators and families and communities are forced to territorialize educational space and in so doing move further outside of traditional democratic institutions in order to imagine and create positive change in the educational experiences of young people.

## Chapter 2

### **Historical Context: Territorialization of Poughkeepsie, PCSD, and PCSD Schools**

Charter school advocates stress the importance of offering more educational options and choices that are otherwise unavailable for low-income families of color within struggling school districts (Carnoy, 2000). However, this rationale begs the obvious question: Why are traditional public schools within low-income communities of color struggling to meet student needs? In asking this question, it is critical to see through the regime of common sense that portrays public schools as a monolith of inflexible bureaucracy, lazy teachers, and overall complacency. To move beyond this discourse is to interrogate and illuminate the neoliberal politics of disposability, and how they have manifested in urban school districts like the Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD) through racist and classist modes of territoriality.

The following historical account of Poughkeepsie and PCSD takes a sociopolitical approach to the following question: Why are the traditional public schools within PCSD currently struggling to meet student needs according to state standards? Ultimately this account reveals how nearly a century of social, economic, and political injustice has produced the contemporary territorialized condition of traditional public schools in PCSD. The account will discuss this multi-scale territorialization of Poughkeepsie at the city, district, and individual school levels.

### **Growing Divisions: City of Poughkeepsie and Town of Poughkeepsie**

Prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Poughkeepsie enjoyed the economic benefits that came with its opportune location along the Hudson River. Much of its industrial commerce was structured around the waterfront, and Poughkeepsie generally “held all major industries within



its borders” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 369). Yet to the great misfortune of the city and its citizens, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was witness to the financial consequences and challenges of de-industrialization. As was the pattern within several cities within the Mid-Hudson Valley during this period, most of the industries on the riverfront began to disappear. Poughkeepsie Iron Works, the Vassar Brewery, and George Pole’s shipyard were only a few among many industrial businesses to close their doors at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This depression of Poughkeepsie’s business sector consequentially “removed the main sources of employment from the urban tax base” and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century most industries had “either died or moved out of the city” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 369). Once the business industry began to close down or relocate outside of the city, the retail followed suit.

Beginning in the 1950s, the effects of deindustrialization on the Mid-Hudson Valley lead to a growing economic divide between the city of Poughkeepsie and the town of Poughkeepsie. The shopping centers along the city’s Main Street deteriorated as the retail along suburban Route 9 flourished. This movement towards suburbanization was facilitated by a larger nationwide pattern of federal policies that “encouraged massive home building and the construction of high ways” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, 209). This economic divide was made even more striking by the impact that IBM brought to the region with its opening in 1942 (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 201). IBM attracted a “higher proportion of professional and managerial workers” to the town of Poughkeepsie, and would go on to “account for 70 percent of all manufacturing employment in the county” by the 1980s. Notably, IBM employed only 11 percent of the city’s population at that time (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 209). Overall, this new economic activity located within the town of Poughkeepsie resulted in “corresponding attrition of land values” and the general “increasing deterioration and decay” of the city (Poughkeepsie, 1967).

At the same time, the economic shifts within the city and town of Poughkeepsie were accompanied by a divide in racial demographics as well. First, the general population within the city began to shrink in size. The population reached its historic peak in 1950 and began to sharply decline into the 1960s. The remaining population in the city was then comprised of people of color, predominantly African American, from “lower income and educational levels” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 368). The racial divide between the city of Poughkeepsie and the town of Poughkeepsie followed the greater nation-wide phenomenon of “white flight” in which white families moved out of urban spaces “in search of newer housing, perhaps with more modern utilities or larger acreage, and often with lower taxes, ‘better schools’ and racial homogeneity” (Flad & Griffen, 2009 p. 208). Encoded in white flight was the racism and classism targeted against the communities of color occupying urban spaces. It took only three decades for white flight to become blatantly visible within the city of Poughkeepsie. Between 1950 and 1980, the “non-white” demographic rose from 4 percent to 26 percent of the city’s population, while the white demographic decreased from 96 percent to 74 percent (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 209).

Over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were numerous community-driven and federally sponsored projects to combat the growing poverty rate within the city of Poughkeepsie. The city received funding to create “innovative social, educational, and health programs” after it was selected to be a Model City in 1967 as a part of the federal government’s “War on Poverty” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 229). Furthermore, the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s contributed to local efforts to create “new programs to redress the problems of inequality and discrimination in Poughkeepsie” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 247). Grassroots activism within the non-profit sector also grew in importance as community institutions such as the Family Partnership Center and the Catherine Street Community Center began to further develop in the

1990s. Later on in 1991 the city partnered with the US Department of Justice to address the “urban blight” of the city through a program called “Weed and Seed” in which the “objective of the effort was to establish a partnership between police, community service organizations, the private sector, and local residents to prevent drug related violence” (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 335). However, despite the combination of grassroots activism and federal fund allocation, 22 percent of the city’s black population still lived below the poverty line by the 1990s, and that percentage was set to steadily increase into the new millennium (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 328). According to the 2013 NYS Poverty Report, 32.4 percent of black residents now live below the poverty line in Poughkeepsie. (Flad & Griffen, 2009, p. 369).

The economic and racial divisions that grew between the city of Poughkeepsie and the town of Poughkeepsie signify the specific processes through which the city and the town became territorialized spaces. The power inequities that were produced through a combination of the de-industrialized economy, the resources of IBM and the racist and classist motivations of white flight produced a bounded and separatist space of whiteness and prosperity within the town of Poughkeepsie. Consequentially, those boundaries of the town produced a very different bounded space— the city of Poughkeepsie. The demarcation of the city as a blighted urban community was as much a product of the perceptions of those outside of its territory as it was the product of the lived realities of those within—in other words, the city’s demarcation occurred through a dialogical process of territoriality. This territorialization and division between the city of Poughkeepsie and the town of Poughkeepsie became increasingly evident and more pronounced through the politics of school districting in the area between the late 1950s and the early 1970s.

**“Don’t Send Your Kids to That School”: Territoriality between School Districts**

The negative perceptions of the city of Poughkeepsie public schools were pronounced in both the town and the city of Poughkeepsie. Dr. Edward Pittman, a graduate of Poughkeepsie High School and a longtime city resident who now serves as an Associate Dean of the College at Vassar College, remembers how these negative perceptions permeated public consciousness and shaped the lived realities of students within the district during this time. Having grown up in the city, Dr. Pittman explains how the “the image of Poughkeepsie was always less than,” and noted that a common refrain among Poughkeepsie residents was “don’t send your kids to that school” (Personal communication, February 4, 2014). If they could afford it, families would send their children to private school to avoid Poughkeepsie’s public schools. Similar to the territoriality of white flight, these negative perceptions of PCSD were fueled by the racism and classism of middle class white families. In many respects, the perception of PCSD public schools as “less than” was a racist and classist myth. In fact, when a State Education Department official visited Poughkeepsie High School in 1970, he recounted that the high school was “a well-organized school in which the students and faculty [worked] together collaboratively” with “experienced faculty and a wide range of curricular offerings” and an overall “strong educational program” (Books, 2006, p. 21). However, the negative perceptions of the city schools spread as white families fled to the town and pulled their children out of PCSD public schools. It was only a matter of time before the territoriality of white flight that divided the town and city would be directly mirrored in a process of territoriality between town and city school districts.

The most monumental manifestation of this territoriality between districts was the effort to create an independent Spackenkill High School. In 1947, five years after IBM opened in the town of Poughkeepsie, the New York State Education Department released a “Master Plan calling for consolidation of the Spackenkill Union Free School District (SUFSD) and the

Poughkeepsie City School District.” This state proposal to consolidate the districts was a part of a larger post World War II federal project of district consolidation, which eventually reduced the number of school districts from 100,000 in 1945 to 16,000 in 1980 (Ravitch, 1983). At that time the SUFSD, located in the town of Poughkeepsie, did not have its own high school. Spackenkill students, predominantly white and middle class, either attended private high school or enrolled at Poughkeepsie High School. However, as the town of Poughkeepsie grew increasingly white and wealthy and the city of Poughkeepsie suffered further economic deterioration, the leadership of the SUFSD continually ignored the mandate for district consolidation, and in 1956 town residents “overwhelmingly endorsed” a plan to create an independent high school in order to pull all Spackenkill youth out of Poughkeepsie High School (Books, 2006, p. 18).

The creation of a new high school was a financially contentious issue because SUFSD benefitted from the tax revenues of IBM and, if independent, would leave the city school district with a significantly smaller pool of resources. If approved, this effort would also further segregate the town and city schools along racial lines. Overall, opponents to independence in both the city and the town identified this movement as the workings of “racism” that would financially abandon Poughkeepsie city schools and “leave Poughkeepsie to rot” (Books, 2006, p. 20). The opponents stressed the importance of “social responsibility” and “invoked a vision of a society united around a commitment to equal educational opportunity, regardless of race and family income” (Books, 2006, p. 20). In other words, opponents to Spackenkill independence sought to create a united and de-territorialized district committed to equitable educational outcomes for all youth.

Those from Spackenkill and in support of an independent high school framed race and class as non-issues within the rationale of their efforts. Spackenkill supporters were adamant that

their motivations were not racist or classist. However, this argument lacks legitimacy given the fact that racial tensions were significantly high within the city during this time (Books, 2006, p. 23). Despite the visibility of these racial tensions, the supporters insisted that the effort for independence was founded upon the belief that Spackenkill youth would benefit from local control, and the academic excellence that would naturally accompany that control.

Supporters of a separate Spackenkill district invoked a vision of a proud and determined community pursuing a dream of independence through talk about local or community control and excellence in schooling. Spackenkill parents, they argued, wanted the best possible schooling for their own children (Books, 2006, p. 25).

These arguments were able to wield a considerable amount of influence at the state level. This influence may have grown stronger due to Spackenkill's decision to hire outside attorneys to assist them in their legal battle with both the State Education Department and the State Commissioner – another indication of financial inequity present throughout the entire case (Books, 2006, p. 19). The Poughkeepsie Board of Education favored the preservation of a consolidated district, and felt that the effort was “an unnecessary and unwarranted expenditure of state and local funds.” However, the Poughkeepsie Board of Education was generally a “minor player” in the court proceedings, and their voices were not as well represented within this legislative struggle (Books, 2006, p. 18).

To the great misfortune of PCSD, the state eventually approved the plan to build a new high school for the Spackenkill Union Free School District. In 1971, the last Spackenkill students left Poughkeepsie High School, and all Spackenkill students in grades 9-12 were enrolled in their own independent high school (Poughkeepsie City School District).

The effort to create a new high school and the approval of such a plan communicated an implicit message to students and families from the city of Poughkeepsie: PCSD public schools were inferior institutions within which academic innovation and intellectual exploration could

not be attained. The suburban community of Spackenkill understood PCSD schools as disposable. The future of young people within the city of Poughkeepsie was not a deciding factor within the advocate rationale. Advocates argued that Spackenkill's ability to meet its "suburban educational needs" would produce greater skilled leaders which would, in turn, "help meet the educational needs of the entire area" (Books, 2006, p. 20). To this day, there has been little direct evidence of a positive impact that Spackenkill High School has had on the city of Poughkeepsie or PCSD. In fact, it has been said that the creation of Spackenkill's independent high school has been "devastating" to PCSD and its students (C. McGill, personal communication, February 25, 2014).

Spackenkill High School was a product of the same territoriality that demarcated the city of Poughkeepsie as a blighted urban community. It was a territoriality that sought to create new spaces for white, middle class families and students that would control financial and educational resources. Similar to white flight, this produced a second territory containing families of color who were challenged by financial insecurity and struggling with underfunded public services. This process of territoriality, which produced two divided territories, privileged individual interest over the public good, and modeled a solution that advocated for the creation of separatist spaces, as opposed to the preservation and investment of struggling public institutions, understood as gone beyond repair. Although Spackenkill High School opened its doors nearly 50 years ago, the same territoriality that created it is also manifested at other levels within the district, such as between schools and within individual schools.

### **The North Side and the South Side: Territoriality between PCSD Schools**

While territorialized divisions emerged between town and city districts, similar modes of territoriality developed within the PCSD itself. Evidence of this district level territoriality was clear in the racially and economically segregated nature of the city's schools during the early

1960s between the north side and the south side of the city. This racial and economic division of the city schools was created in part due to the south side's closer proximity to the suburbanized and predominantly white town of Poughkeepsie. Today, these city divisions persist—the socially constructed and fluid border between the north side and the south side is unofficially located along Hooker Avenue, which runs diagonally through the city from northwest to southeast (E. Pittman, personal communication, February 4, 2014). A collective analysis of Table 2, Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate how the closer a PCSD elementary school is to the south side of Hooker Avenue, the more likely that school is to enroll a greater percentage of white students from financially secure families. This pattern is most visible through the 2011-12 student demographics at Krieger Elementary School.

Attempts to racially and economically de-segregate or de-territorialize PCSD schools have been in place since the early 1960s. For example, in 1963 over two-thirds of students enrolled at Warring Elementary and Morse Elementary on the north side of the city were students of color, while only 3 percent of students enrolled are Krieger Elementary schools on the south side of the city were students of color (Poughkeepsie City School District). Although the 1963 district superintendent denied the racially segregated reality of PCSD, the district officials were left with few options but to publically acknowledge and address the severity of the segregation after both community organizations and the NAACP intervened to bring forth a series of racial discrimination suits against the school board. Several measures were taken to desegregate the schools at that time, such as busing initiatives and the creation of magnet schools, yet all were met with varied and often limited degrees of success (Poughkeepsie City School District). The measures themselves were problematic in that they did not address the rooted issues of racism and classism within the city. Dr. Pittman remembers the busing strategies, aimed



at desegregating PCSD, as specific examples of the inequity between the north side and the south side of the city during the early 90s:

At that that time the children from Smith Street housing projects [Hudson Gardens] on the north side were bused to Krieger School...and I thought, 'Why do black students have to be bused to the white neighborhood? Why cant there be a sort of busing white kids to Warring school or one of the schools on the north side.' And so fundamentally, even though people thought of busing in terms of integration or busing in terms of bringing black kids into a district that has more resources...well first of all why does it have more resources? Districts should be equally funded. That was always in my head in terms of equity and social justice.

(Personal communication, February 4, 2014)

The location of the Smith Street housing projects is significant—it was built along the most northeastern region of Poughkeepsie, on the “margins of the city,” and is today neighbored by “dirty and noxious industry such as auto body shops and the city’s public transfer station for dumping bulk items” (Vassar YouTube Channel, 2010). If the families who lived at the city’s margins wanted access to better educational resources, their children were bused to the south side of the city. However, as Dr. Pittman noted, this effort towards de-segregation did not include an equitable or just distribution of resources between the north and south sides. Furthermore, the busing of students from one community to another reifies the territoriality in that the busing initiative did not seek to radically uproot the social inequities within schools on the north side, but simply reinforced the superiority of the separatist and predominantly white spaces.

The divisions and inequities between the north and south sides are also reinforced through locations of the PCSD middle and high schools on the south side of the city. Carmen McGill, former PCSD PTA president, current member of the FPCS founding group and active city community member, provides some insight on this issue:

We only have one middle school in the district and one high school in the district...both of them are on the south side. The children live on the north side. Most of the children who attend public school live on the north side...This is a walking school district. So they have a long walk to school...As far as the students are concerned, that is a difficult situation. It means that they have

to ride the bus, they have to get up earlier in order to get to school. Most of the people who live on the south side drive their children to school. You know. Or they walk them.

(Personal communication, February 25, 2014)

Here McGill is speaking to the different ways that students from the south side and north side move through space in order to arrive at the middle or high school each morning. The location of both schools privileges south side students and implicitly communicates an underinvestment in the educational experiences of north side students. For north side students, the idea of neighborhood public schools as sites of democracy and collaboration cannot be as fully realized when their middle and high schools are not located within the community that they predominantly serve.

It is important to note that these divisions and borders are in flux. As previously noted, the border along Hooker Avenue is not fixed, absolute or officially recognized. In an interview with McGill, I wondered aloud whether these divisions might be based more on perceptions than on realities within the district. However, McGill explained how these divisions were not based on perceptions, but were very real within the city. “It’s kind of blending a little bit now,” McGill noted in reference to the north and south side territories, “Because more people of color are living on the south side and more white people are living on the north side” (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). However, she maintained that many Poughkeepsie residents felt the division between territories. Kadiyah Omnae Lodge, a current north side resident and FPCS founding group member, explained how she does not always feel safe on the north side of Poughkeepsie due to the large amounts of gang, drug and police activity on the city streets. “I don’t know how any person, any child can succeed [academically] in that type of environment when every day they’re walking through it,” she explains (Personal communication, February 24, 2014). The question of insecurity in regards to academic success is confirmed by the fact that on average, students enrolled in PCSD public schools consistently score below state standards.

(Poughkeepsie City School District Report Card, 2011-12). As Lodge notes, it is certainly true that many students from the north side confront a vast multiplicity of obstacles in their journey towards academic success. Those obstacles are made greater through implicit messages of inferiority communicated through busing strategies, the middle and high schools' greater proximity to the south side, and the financial disparities between residents on the north and the south sides. At the same time, divisions, inequities and territories along race and class lines exist not only between schools, but within the city's individual schools as well.

### **“A Two-Tiered System”: Territoriality on the Individual School Level**

Much like many traditional public schools throughout the country, the territoriality present at the individual school level is seated in race and class based differences. Dr. Pittman explains that this territoriality within schools is visible through a “two-tier” system of education, a system which he first took note of as a student during in the district during the 1970s:

You know there were two schools within a school: the honors program and the college track, which was essentially 90 percent white, and then the general tracks. Fortunately I was able to be in the honors track but there were very few kids of color. I think that was one way white parents who did choose to send their kids to Poughkeepsie could have a school within a school. And so they still kept the resources very two tiered. They could still get semi private school suburban school within an urban school structure. I think growing up that was always very clear and unspoken but you could see it in the way the schools were set up. (Personal communication, February 4, 2014)

The two-tiered and territorialized structure of PCSD schools persists today, and is upheld by several institutional and interpersonal factors. For example, tracking procedures reinforce racial stratification, as there is an inequitable enrollment of white students and students of color in higher level courses. Data from the US Department of Education's 2011/12 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) supplies evidence of the way tracking produces racial territoriality within the schools. As demonstrated by the federal data in Figures 3 and 4, white students are a general minority in school enrollment at the PCSD middle and high schools. However, the enrollment of

white students in higher-level math courses, such as Algebra I and Calculus, is significantly greater than the percentage generally enrolled in the school (Figures 5 & 6). The inverse is true for black and Latino students—their enrollment in higher-level math courses significantly decreases in comparison to their general enrollment percentages. It is also significant to note that this CRDC data reveals the ways in which students of color, particularly black students, are punitively disciplined at a significantly more frequent rate than white students (Figures 7 & 8). Based upon this data as a whole, white students and students of color at both the middle and high school levels are likely to have vastly different educational experiences within the very same school, both in relation to course level and disciplinary practices—thus, the two-tiered system.

The two-tiered system is maintained through the efforts on the part of white families to create a “school within a school” model for their children. This includes, as Dr. Pittman noted, assuring that there is a greater access to resources in higher tracked classrooms where white students are predominantly enrolled. In interviews with Dr. Pittman, Lodge, and McGill, all acknowledged the influence that white families hold within PCSD. In general, white middle class families are more likely to advocate for their children in ways that are institutionally supported by the school. For example, white families are more likely to occupy positions in groups such as the PTA than parents of color due to a greater likelihood of economic security, and therefore a greater availability of time to dedicate to their child’s education in a way that is institutionally supported. A differentiated or potential lack of parental support from black or Latino families is rooted not in a lack of interest or dedication to their child’s education, but in institutional and systemic structures of racial, economic, and linguistic oppression that generally prevent low-income parents of color from participating in the same type of educational support as middle class white parents.

Let me be clear—I make this distinction not to say that *all* white families or *all* families of color have any one way of navigating schools or advocating for their children. I also do not argue that families of color are disinterested or disinvested in their children’s education. This racist and classist assumption is one that allows the neoliberal social order to individualize and thus perpetuate systemic oppression and the degradation of public institutions. I make this distinction to show how the interests of white families are generally more active, prevalent, and privileged in shaping the current social and political structures within PCSD schools. The territoriality that has emerged from the influences and privileging of white families, who have historically sought to create and maintain superior educational territories, will become increasingly clear in my explication and analysis of the FPCS effort.

The overall purpose of this historical and socio-political account of Poughkeepsie’s territorialization is to broadly demonstrate how the borders and territorialities created along race and class lines have produced the challenges that the PCSD faces today. The socially and unjustly constructed “disposable” status of young people of color has been made evident through the racist and classist territoriality active between the city and town of Poughkeepsie, the schools districts, city schools, and within individual schools as well. In general, this mode of territoriality in Poughkeepsie active at each level is produced through institutional inequalities and the efforts of white community members to, intentionally or unintentionally, create borders around superior educational spaces for white students. As demonstrated, these efforts are carried through with little consideration of the opportunities for and futures of students of color. Therefore, in creating superior educational spaces, the space outside becomes newly territorialized and characterized by inferiority. As demonstrated, these inferior, territorialized spaces are those occupied by students of color. Thus, the borders surrounding these racially and economically territorialized space are,

as Delaney notes, “contradictory, problematical, and multifaceted” – while the borders secure power and control of resources for white community members, they are the sources of insecurity of and disinvestment in the Black and Latino communities of Poughkeepsie.

While this territoriality is essential to understanding why PCSD traditional public schools are struggling to meet student needs, it is unfair and inaccurate to characterize Poughkeepsie only in terms of the racial segregation and inequity that the community, notably the black and Latino communities, have endured. In fact, even to refer to the district as “racially segregated” is a misnomer to some Poughkeepsie residents, like Dr. Pittman, because “segregated” has historically connoted a “less-than” position and thus does little to highlight the strength and resiliency of dynamic black communities. In addition to the challenges and obstacles in meeting student needs, the PCSD has had much notable success beyond statistics and data collection. As Dr. Pittman said, “the numbers don’t tell the whole story.” Many Poughkeepsie students, or “bright spots” as Dr. Pittman calls them, have graduated and gone on to achieve great success (Personal communication, February 4, 2014). Furthermore, interviewees cited student exchange and exposure to identity difference within a multicultural and multiracial district as one of the greatest benefits of student experience within PCSD (F. Mulhern, personal communication, January 4, 2014; E. Pittman, personal communication, February 4, 2014). In general, it is critical to expand the perception and understanding of Poughkeepsie beyond a deficit model to see the richness and multiplicity of experiences that exist within the district.

Nonetheless, this chapter has demonstrated how and at what levels racist and classist territoriality is active within Poughkeepsie at large. This territoriality, produced by systemic racism, classism and white separatist spaces, is pervasive and deep from the administrative levels all the way down to the experiences of individual students. Not only is this territoriality

pervasive and deep, but insidious as well—its process has been masked by the regime of common sense, which reinforces the idea that traditional public schools within low-income communities of color are spaces devoid of hope for positive change. Due to the race and class based territorialization, and the regime of common sense that legitimates this territorialization, many administrators, teachers, and families feel that any effort to justly and equitably de-territorialize educational space within the PCSD is a profoundly challenging endeavor.

The next chapter recounts one of the first and most significant contemporary efforts to de-territorialize educational space in the PCSD—the Circle of Courage Learning Center (CCLC). However, as will be evidenced through a historical reflection and analysis, the CCLC exemplifies the challenges inherent in any project that seeks to de-territorialize educational space within a district that has been historically rooted in the abandonment of public institutions and the politics of disposability.

### Chapter 3

#### **The Circle of Courage Learning Center: “A Bold Venture” For Change**

The process of authentically de-territorializing space within the contemporary landscape of public education must be grounded in a renewal of the social contract, the return to democratic and public institutions, and the preservation of the right to the city. Created in 2002, a new alternative public school called the Circle of Courage Learning Center (CCLC) was created as among the first district-lead projects with the intent to de-territorialize the Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD). The CCLC’s radical vision to reclaim Poughkeepsie youth considered “at risk” was unprecedented within the district. The CCLC was the first educational territory in the district that sought to prioritize and privilege the needs of low-income PCSD students of color with “behavioral challenges” or “significant learning disabilities” – in other words, those students who are most often marginalized, criminalized, and disposed of within the neoliberal social order (Sloneker, 2007). However, this new mode of territoriality, which sought to support rather than further marginalize these students “at risk”, was difficult to maintain within the PCSD because the district was already so deeply territorialized through structural racism and classism, the general abandonment of public institutions, and the consequential lack of support that the PCSD was able to offer the CCLC. The story of the CCLC reveals the challenges inherent in any attempt to de-territorialize space through the creation of new educational territories. However, the story of the CCLC and its eventual closing also reveal why the Four Pillars Charter School (FPCS) founders feel that it is important to create a new educational territory that is, unlike the CCLC, autonomous of PCSD control and further removed from traditional democratic and public educational institutions.

#### **The CCLC Beginning**



The story of the CCLC begins with former superintendent Bob Watson. Elected in 2000, Watson was well known for his charisma and radical vision for the district. Originally from the city of Poughkeepsie and having grown up on Garden Street, Watson was an inspiration to many of the residents and families on Poughkeepsie's north side. Frank Mulhern, former CCLC administrator and current FPCS founding group member, described Watson as "not the most [formally] educated guy in the world" and yet he was a "brilliant" and "instinctively smart" man who was committed to making real change in his community (Personal communication, Jan 31, 2014). The Poughkeepsie Journal referred to him as a "vibrant face and voice at many public events, constantly championing his students—many from poor families—and what they could accomplish" (Valkys, 2008). During his time as superintendent from 2000-2006, Watson confronted district challenges such as low graduation rates and poor student retention at the high school level. In order to address these issues, Watson felt it was important to look beyond the traditional public schools because he predicted that the PCSD public schools could not support a strong and healthy program geared towards reclaiming students who had been discharged or who were struggling more generally. He sought to create an entirely new space that would reclaim discharged students, support those students at risk of dropping out and eventually return all students to the traditional public schools, thus strengthening the entire district. Watson's vision for an alternative public school was seen as his "boldest venture" during his superintendence (E. Pittman, personal correspondence, February 4, 2014). In 2002, Watson sought to actualize this vision through the creation of the CCLC.

The officially stated purpose of the CCLC was to reclaim the students who had been discharged from the district. Those discharged students were enrolled in educational facilities outside of the district such as Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), to which

the district was paying “quite a bit of money” for each student discharged (F. Mulhern, personal communication, January 31, 2014). These students were discharged because “the district didn’t feel that they could take care of [the youth] themselves” due to behavioral challenges and learning disabilities (D. Paine, personal communication, January 22, 2014). Mulhern described the purpose of the CCLC and its study body:

[CCLC’s] existence really was a noble effort to reclaim Poughkeepsie’s youth who belonged in public school; they had the right to it. As far as the creation for the model for the school we knew we were going to be getting kids who were either at risk or at the very least designated and classified as special education students. So they would be students who more than likely could not just walk into an academic environment and learn. Their affective needs, their social emotional and developmental needs were going to be more than ordinary.

(Personal communication, January 31, 2014)

This idea of “reclaiming” students through the Circle of Courage philosophy was developed through a collaborative project by scholars Larry Brendtro and Martin Brokenleg. Brendtro is a professor of children’s behavioral disorders and Brokenleg is a youth worker and a Lakota scholar of Native American studies. In order to develop a social and emotional learning program for youth at-risk, the co-founders drew from traditional Lakota approaches to child rearing practices that were based in fostering in children a positive sense of community, belonging, safety, and confidence in youth. Brendtro and Brokenleg published their work on The Circle of Courage philosophy in their book, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (1990).

The Circle of Courage philosophy was presented as a potential, small-scale solution to issues that the district and many of its students were facing. If successful, the intent was to “incorporate parts of [the CCLC model] throughout the district” (D. Pain, personal communication, April 30, 2014). Bob Watson sought to assemble a team of educators and administrators to establish CCLC, an alternative school whose name would come from the philosophy that guided it. This team consisted of Frank Mulhern, Dwight Paine, Tree Arrington, and John Rodriguez. Frank Mulhern, resident of Rhinebeck, NY, was coming to PCSD with

years of experience, mostly in private schools, developing and implementing social and emotional learning programs. He taught a pilot program based upon the Circle of Courage philosophy during the 2001-02 school year at Poughkeepsie Middle School (Sloneker, 2007). Dwight Paine, a resident of LaGrange, NY, brought 30 years of experience in both teaching and administration at the Poughkeepsie Day School, an elite and high performing private school driven by creative pedagogies and experiential based learning. Tree Arrington, youth worker and educational activist in Poughkeepsie, was an asset to the project in terms of his connections to the community. Arrington is currently the Founder and Director of the R.E.A.L. Skills Network Program for peer mentorship at the Family Partnership Center. Finally, John Rodriguez brought his expertise as a child behavioral specialist to the effort. Watson's strategy to recruit educational professionals from outside of the PCSO was deliberate. For example, Paine explained that Watson reached out to him due to Paine's "progressive tradition" in creative pedagogies because Watson "wanted someone who had that background rather than a traditional public school" (Personal communication, January 22, 2014).

After Bob Watson assembled the CCLC team, the school itself was established in a record-breaking period of four-months. Mulhern remembered how great the creative energy flowed during that period, specifically in terms of developing the school's mission, vision, and curriculum. Regarding facilities, Watson was in contact with a local developer who had a free building open at 160 Union Street—the new home to CCLC. "It was almost unheard of at the time," remembers Paine, referring to the fast-paced effort to establish the school. "We opened in September 2002...the paint was literally still wet on the walls" (Personal communication, January 22, 2014). At the time of its opening, the school consisted of a K-8 program with 140 students enrolled. There is no demographic information publically available of the students

enrolled at the time of the school's opening, but the 2005-06 CCLC New York State Report Card reported that 85 percent of students received free and reduced price lunch, 66 percent were African American, 29 percent were white, and 6 percent were Latino. All enrolled students "either classified as special education or non-classified with a history of academic difficulties and/or ineffective and problematic social skills" (Sloneker, 2007).

### **Foundational Philosophies and Approaches**

The CCLC team felt it was important to structure the values and mission of the school around the specific needs and assets of the students. The CCLC "whole-child" approach consisted of an emphasis on "asset-building, therapeutic behavioral management, and the Circle of Courage philosophy" (Sloneker, 2007). The community was asset-based in that it drew from the strengths and skills of the youth. No grades were administered, and student learning was measured with written feedback and project-based assessments (D. Paine, personal communication, January 22, 2014). The behavioral management piece was located in the counseling programs that "taught the art of relaxation, conflict resolution and options for self-management" (Sloneker, 2007). Students were able to thrive in such a way that was directed by their own sense of agency. The Circle of Courage philosophy, infused throughout the entirety of school culture, was key in creating a strong sense of community that touched all community members. From administrators to the students to the custodians, all community members followed the Circle of Courage philosophy because it was important that all members could be seen and understood as an asset to the community. All community members were asked to identify within one of the four different identity groups symbolized by a "totem animal" within the Circle of Courage, each with its own assets and needs. The main message within the philosophy is that no identity group or single person can thrive in isolation—each requires a

balance within the circle in order for the community to thrive together (F. Mulhern, personal communication, January 31, 2014). This interdependence fosters the idea—and ideally the lived reality—that each student and staff member is an asset to the community. The egalitarian leadership model of the school also facilitated this positive sense of community. For the first year and a half of its existence, the school operated without a principal and under the shared leadership of all four administrators who took part in all elements of daily life within the school (F. Mulhern, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Paine spoke to this sense of community that began on CCLC's opening day:

I helped move furniture into the building when we started and there were people on the maintenance staff who were shocked to learn that I was an administrator because I was doing this stuff to get the school ready. So we were just kind of outside the box a little bit and that's what made it great. (Personal communication, January 22, 2014)

Overall, the culture at CCLC emphasized the importance of centralizing and privileging student voices, which involved educators practicing deep listening instead of talking to or at youth. From this practice of privileging student voices, a positive language was developed and cultivated. This language was one that Paine saw as missing from the traditional public schools at the time:

The main feature about the Circle of Courage philosophy that really made this work was that it gives [teachers and administrators] the language to talk about kids and it's a positive language. And so much of what you may have overheard in all of your time in the [traditional public] schools isn't that positive. If you could be a fly in the faculty room, it's a little discouraging sometimes what you hear, you know. But this [CCLC], the whole tone of this building was positive. (Personal communication, January 22, 2014)

Paine understood the centrality of student voices at the CCLC as a key difference between the traditional public schools within the PCSD and the CCLC. This difference is further evidenced by the opinions and feelings of the CCLC students themselves. As Paine explained, some of the middle school students who had been enrolled in the CCLC due to various behavioral challenges had “in a sense been cured” after thriving in the program. However these students did not want to

return to the traditional public schools within the district—they wanted remain at the CCLC (D. Paine, personal communication, January 22, 2014).

### **Successes and Challenges**

For the first few years of its existence, The CCLC experienced success in many respects. Its greatest successes consisted of high attendance rates, a strong sense of community, and the overall efficacy of the Circle of Courage philosophy in terms of the social and emotional growth and learning of the students. According to Mulhern, students who formerly had significantly high attrition rates were now regularly attending school. Mulhern attributed this to the positive sense of community at the school, in which students “felt accepted” and felt that “they had a sense of belonging” (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). As Paine remembered, “every student and faculty member could tell you what their totem animal was, what their strengths were, what their assets were, and how they were using those assets to take care of some of the needs that they had” (Personal communication, January 22, 2014). The philosophy was so engrained in the community that the students were better able to thrive socially and emotionally. For the administrators, this social and emotional growth was the first step in actualizing academic success for students, as the founders felt that maximizing student potential for learning must be grounded in a meaningful community (F. Mulhern, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

The success of the CCLC was mixed in regards to academic achievement. While some students were having “quite a bit of success,” others struggled in achieving their academic potential in line with state standards. According to the CCLC 2005-06 NYSED Report Card, all students made Adequate Yearly Progress in science, but failed to do so in English Language Arts and Math. Although the CCLC qualified as a “School in Good Standing,” the founders felt that the school had not had enough time to fully develop the curriculum and pedagogy to its optimal

potential (Sloneker, 2007). “I think we were just getting it in that third year where everything was clicking” Mulhern remembers of the students’ academic progress (Personal communication, January 31, 2014).

The CCLC also struggled in maintaining its positive school culture and overall Circle of Courage philosophy. While Paine remembers that the CCLC authentically followed its philosophy for two years, Mulhern recounted that it lasted for four years. However, both agree that the “supports” for CCLC began to fall apart due to a variety of different factors. First, Mulhern found that a change in leadership accounted for the decline. Almost 2 years after its opening, the CCLC was assigned a principal who, despite her strength in educational administration, “needed coaching as to what the [Circle of Courage] model was” (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). Furthermore, the district transferred Paine and then Mulhern out of the CCLC—Paine was sent to central office and Mulhern to Poughkeepsie Middle School. Because the positive school culture and philosophy lost its support, the CCLC began to be widely perceived as the “dumping ground” of the district, in which “bad kids” were taken out of “integrated classrooms” and placed in a new environment riddled with “discipline problems” (E. Pittman, personal communication, February 4, 2014). This idea of the CCLC as a “dumping ground” was directly in opposition to the “invitational model” upon which CCLC was founded. Once Mulhern was transferred, the CCLC principal sought him out for advice.

[The principal] was getting all of the kids who were kicked out. In the Circle of Courage [philosophy], kids are never coming to the circle kicked out. They were coming to the circle under what we call an invitational model. They are invited to attend. And although they didn’t have a choice, we made it so that they were participating in choice about their attendance, even if they were resistant. (Personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Mulhern is speaking to the lack of agency that students exercised in enrolling at the CCLC.

Because the maintenance of student agency was critical in the establishment of a positive school culture and an egalitarian community, students enrolled at CCLC in its later years were unable to

communally thrive as intended. Additionally there was an incredible amount of “internal resistance” to the CCLC throughout the district. Amongst district administrators, the CCLC was an ultimately “unpopular” effort. The primary reason the school was able to go forward and last as long as it did was due to Watson’s influence and vision for creating radical change within the district. Therefore, the most devastating event throughout the CCLC trajectory came with Watson’s resignation and the appointment of Dr. Laval Wilson as superintendent in early 2006.

According to the Poughkeepsie Journal, at the time of his resignation, “Watson said he was leaving to pursue other interests in education” (Valkys, 2008). However, there were a variety of factors leading to his resignation, many of which remain unclear. An investigation of the district’s fiscal affairs began in 2006 due to accusations of Watson’s misuse and abuse of district funds. In 2008, Watson was formally “accused of misappropriating one million dollars in district funds” and “falsifying certain documents pertaining to the recruitment of the Circle of Courage coordinators” (Hertz, 2008). According to Mulhern, the district generally saw Watson’s creation of the CCLC as a “top heavy” program that “self-served [Bob Watson] and his friends,” the CCLC administrators (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). However, Mulhern had not personally known Watson previous to the creation of CCLC, and maintains that this perception was not true. Ultimately Watson was found not guilty of the allegations held against him (Poughkeepsie Journal, 2009). However, these events have heavily impacted the district in ways that the district has not yet recovered from today. Specifically, it contributed to the mistrust that exists within the community, between teachers, administrators, and parents. For example, Dr. Pittman said that the affairs offered the public “more reason to think that [PCSD administration] doesn’t have a strong foundation for providing for children.” McGill noted that it also fueled the idea that many administrators and educators within PCSD act solely in their own interests,



instead of the interests of students and of the community (Personal communication, February 25, 2014).

After undergoing much transformation through a slow decline, the CCLC project came to an official close in 2010. Members of the founding team, specifically Paine and Mulhern, felt that the district bureaucracy led to the decline of CCLC. More specifically, Mulhern felt the district was not equipped to support the radical change that was at the core of the CCLC vision:

I realized the problem was—and I probably knew it early but I didn’t want to admit it—when you inject into a system something novel that may even be healthy and helpful, the system itself, much like our own immune system, will seek to reject it because it is different and it is an attack...I think [CCLC] just fell apart because when you have something like that, it has to either be a model of improvement for everyone else or it has to be isolated and left alone, almost like a test model with perpetuity to it. Or it has to be removed. (Personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Despite the slow decline of the CCLC, the school’s beginning provided a “glimpse of proof” that all youth were capable of thriving within a supportive and communal learning environment (F. Mulhern, personal communication, 2014). However, after Watson’s resignation the district as a whole began to “spiral downwards” in terms of students’ academic achievement (C. McGill, personal communication, February 25, 2014). As district scores on standardized tests significantly decreased from the 2005-06 academic year to the 2010-11 academic year under the leadership of former superintendent Dr. Wilson, the fact that all students are capable of enriched, intellectual learning became increasingly difficult for administrators, teachers and students to see, understand, and actualize (Poughkeepsie City School District Report Card, 2011-12).

### **Hard to Make Change in Poughkeepsie?**

The decline of the CCLC and the public scandal of Watson’s administration that surrounded it further solidified the idea within the district that it is difficult to make positive change within the PCSD. This perception and reality is visible and deeply engrained at every level of the PCSD today. In each interview I conducted, I asked the subjects if they felt it was

difficult to make change in PCSD. Although their responses indicated that making change is difficult, all provided commentary that acknowledged the ways in which these difficulties are rooted in complex, multifaceted and systemic injustices, which reproduce the patterns of territoriality that developed over the course of many decades. The responses they provided can be synthesized into two principle reasons as to why it is difficult to make change in PCSD. First, that the nature of the politics amongst both administrators and teachers lack a student-centered vision. This lack of a student-centered approach breeds low expectations for students. Second, parents and families are struggling financially in such a way that exacerbates the lack of institutional support for low-income students of color. As explained by those interviewed, a combination of these two factors creates a dynamic in which defeat and stagnancy becomes “engrained in the culture” of public schooling in low-income districts. However, it is also important to continually situate and see this process as a product of neoliberal politics of abandonment and disposability, and the territoriality that creates concentrated and bounded spaces with power, and those bounded spaces without.

McGill succinctly summarized her perspective on the politics within the district: “The whole mantra of the school district has been ‘What’s good for me to make my money off the backs of these children?’...not [the question] ‘What’s best for the children’” (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). In other words, she has observed that the district operates within a framework that is not student centered, but is instead based upon the interests of adults. Nationwide, charter school advocates often reference what they see as a privileging of adult interests over the interests of children in their arguments for charter school growth (Students First; Cavanagh, 2011). Unions and union contracts are also a point of contention for charter school advocates across the country as well (Chilcot, 2010). The topic of the teacher’s union and

the union contract were brought up throughout several interviews. While most of those interviewed felt that unions were critical for teachers to advocate for themselves and what they deserved in the workplace, they insisted that the union contract itself makes no mention of young people beyond the discussions of disciplinary methods. Mulhern, who completed his graduate dissertation on teachers' contracts in the Mid-Hudson Valley, explained how the union contract is "the source of distortion for teachers' imagination of their profession."

What happens is teachers get indoctrinated in retirement and their tenure, and how to do this and the union and all that. [The teacher's contract] is this document that isn't really about teaching, it's a labor document. Teachers should be fighting through their code of ethics, which most of them don't even know they have. They fight through their right to not be dismissed to have a coffee break...so that's a major interference. (Personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Mulhern illuminates how it is difficult to cultivate better student outcomes when the teachers' contract is not oriented towards student learning. Dr. Pittman recounted similar issues of the teachers union being a "barrier to change" during his time as school board president (Personal communication, February 4, 2014).

The teacher's union and the union contract as a "barrier to change" speaks to the ways in which the neoliberal social order has co-opted the traditional collaborative tools established to uphold public and democratic institutions. At its core, the union contract is meant to be a means through which educators can strengthen both their collective power and the public school as an institution. However, because the neoliberal social order is so pervasive in every aspect of contemporary public institutions, the contracts have transformed into a document that focuses on the interests and needs of the individual—not the interests and the needs of the individual as inherently connected to the communal preservation of the public good. This is an intentional and deliberate transformation within the neoliberal social order of public education, which seeks to demonize unions and eventually de-unionize workers in all public and private institutions. However while identifying the union and its contract as a "barrier to change" is a product of the

neoliberal project, it remains a reality that positive change for students is difficult to cultivate when student learning, community, and collaboration are not prioritized in the teacher's contract.

The lack of a student-centered approach within the district is also exemplified with the generally punitive attitude and disrespect that is targeted towards students. Again, McGill cited the teacher's union contract in order to support this argument. "It's just a code of conduct for children," McGill explained. "You can't do that, you can't do this...If you do it then these are the consequences...there's nothing positive at all in it. Like, if your conduct is appropriate, if your conduct is respectful, these are the rewards that you get" (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). McGill is speaking to a deficit model that is generally applied throughout the district, rather than a student-centered, asset based approach. This deficit model is a product of a larger project that cultural critic and theorist Henry Giroux identifies as the state's effort to "punish those who are caught in the downward spiral" of its market-based principles (2010, p. 74). Again, the deficit approach and the politics of disposability that harm low-income students of color are further evidenced through Figures 7 and 8. Ultimately, low expectations for both academic achievement and behavior reproduce low outcomes amongst students, ultimately resulting in the punitive treatment of youth. As proven time and again by educational researches and scholars, the criminalization of low-income people of color does very little to produce positive outcomes and instead maintains structurally oppressive systems such as "school-to-prison" pipeline (Elias, 2013).

The adult-centered "mantra" of the district that McGill explained is further evidenced through what both McGill and Lodge cited as a general "adversarial relationship" between families and administrators and teachers (Personal communication, February 25 & February 24, 2014). One reason for this adversarial relationship is the families' distrust of the district resulting

from issues such as Bob Watson's alleged misuse of district funds. However, this adversarial relationship is further exacerbated by tensions regarding community and race. Many teachers and administrators within the PCSD are not north side city residents or community members. In this common case, the perception amongst the PCSD families is that those district employees from outside of the city do not "have a vested interest" in the wellbeing of the community. Within this community-based distrust is the racial tension present between white school personnel and the families of color. As McGill explained, "In Poughkeepsie, most of the teachers don't look like the children that they're supposed to serve" which consequentially creates a fractious learning environment laden with inequitable power dynamics encoded in racial hierarchies. The city of Poughkeepsie does not stand alone in regards to these community and race-based tensions between school personnel and families, as approximately 84 percent of educators nationwide are white (Feistritzer, 2011).

However, a greater percentage of administrators and teachers of color does not inherently foster a healthier or more positive sense of school community for children of color. McGill noted how "many of the people of color who work in the district have taken on what I call the philosophy of the oppressor...the philosophy of the white educational system" (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). That is, the PCSD is situated within a system that operates through a "culture of power," which generally privileges white ways of being and seeing in the world and invalidates those ways of being and seeing that fall outside of that culture of power. A phrase coined by educator and scholar Lisa Delpit, the "culture of power" is present in "linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self" within larger US society and within schools (1988, p. 283). Thus, families and students of color are left unsupported within institutions that holistically and insidiously invalidate their racial and cultural identities, resulting

in a lack of collaborative process between schools and families and often in adversarial relationships.

The financial instability of many families within the city of Poughkeepsie and the north side of the city was the second reason that most interview participants cited as to why it is difficult to make change in the district. Lodge connected the financial situation of city families to the sense of complacency and defeat amongst the community—which precludes hope and upholds oppressive dynamics within PCSD.

Well change is always difficult but I think that people have to have a sense of hope and optimism, and without those two things change can't occur...One of the reasons why families can't really be hopeful or optimistic is their economic situations. There are no jobs, and they're struggling to put their kids in school...I think that until maybe the families start taking advantage of programs or if they start looking at themselves and they want better, they'll get better. But they're not going to get it if they're not optimistic or if they're just content...I guess complacent is the real word I should use because it's just the norm. (Personal communication, February 24, 2014)

McGill also noted how the financial constraints of PCSD families and the resulting lack of strong family engagement in education is a significant detriment to student achievement within the district. While this may be true of some families, it is also important to acknowledge that low-income families of color are “quite diverse in their commitment to their children’s schooling” in the sense that not all low-income families face the same challenges in navigating their child’s education, or respond to those challenges in the same ways (Fuller, Elmore and Orfield 1996). Furthermore, like all of the barriers to change previously mentioned, it is critical to understand that the way in which families’ financial instability acts as a barrier to change is not the result of an individual’s poor choices, actions or inactions. Instead, this barrier must be understood within the politics of disposability through which low-income youth from families of color lack institutional support, and are consequentially met with significant and often-insurmountable challenges to achieve on the same level as their white, middle class peers.

While all those interviewed felt that it was hard to make change within the district through the traditional public schools, it was also unanimously acknowledged that there are many dedicated and innovative teachers and administrators who work tirelessly to create positive change in partnership with families and students. As Paine commented on change, “It’s not easy, [change is] real slow. A lot of good people. A lot of great things [in the district]. But there isn’t a lot of follow through” (Personal communication, January 22, 2014). This “follow through” is in large part prevented by the barriers that are outlined above. Significantly, even just the proliferation of the idea that it is hard to make change in the district is in itself a barrier to creating change.

Ultimately, the CCLC was at once an exciting and discouraging endeavor. As an attempt to de-territorialize the PCSD through the creation of an alternative public school within the district for the most marginalized youth of the city, the CCLC was ultimately unable to fulfill its long-term vision for a healthier and stronger district. According to Mulhern, this vision could not be fulfilled because the CCLC was too vulnerable under the direct control and oversight of the district (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). As I have argued throughout, these weaknesses and inequities within the district are manifestations of territoriality. Therefore, the district could not support the CCLC and support it in actualizing its vision because the district had already been warped through neoliberal abandonment and the politics of disposability.

Former CCLC administrators Mulhern and Paine did not think that accepting this defeat was an option. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the failures of the CCLC under district control motivated Mulhern and Paine to push for the city of Poughkeepsie’s first ever charter school to create a better educational options for families within the city of Poughkeepsie. The creation of a charter school would allow for the autonomy and sovereignty that, according to

Mulhern, might have been the key to the success of the CCLC. The decision to push for a charter school after the closing of the CCLC demonstrates the ways in which these educational reformers sought to move further outside of traditional public schools and the district as a whole in order to make positive change for the youth of the city. This shift further outside and away from democratic and public institutions is underpinned by the neoliberal social order and the regime of common sense that offers educational reformers, families, and community members little hope for positive change other than through privatized space. As will be revealed, even within privatized space the hope for positive change remains staunchly limited due to the deep territoriality active within the city of Poughkeepsie



## Chapter 4

### **The Four Pillars Charter School: A New Educational Territory**

The founders of the Four Pillars Charter School (FPCS) have framed the effort as a potential alternative to the bureaucratic and political constraints active within the Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD), as well as a lack of educational options for families within the district. According to the FPCS official website, the effort is necessary at this time due to the city's "level of poverty, the lack of school choice, and the uncertain outcomes for students" that produce "palpable but covert messages of inferiority and defeat for so many families." In this way, the FPCS founding group stands in opposition to the violence that the politics of disposability have inflicted upon the city of Poughkeepsie. If approved by the New York State Department of Education (NYSED), the FPCS will offer a choice to families in the city of Poughkeepsie that may bring "hope for success for their children." As noted in the previous chapter, maintaining hope in the face of adversity is critical for actualizing a better quality of life for the city's youth.

The FPCS effort is evidence of the way in which educators and families are left to channel a hope for change not into traditional democratic institutions, but into private spaces. Due to the neoliberal politics of disposability combined with the territorialization of the PCSD, many within the PCSD feel that there is little room or energy available to create positive change within the PCSD public schools that already exist. The reality is that there exists an immediate need for stronger and alternative educational options for youth, and the neoliberal regime of common sense pushes reformers who seek to address this need further outside of public spaces. In this retreat from public space, the potential for a new private territory has emerged: the FPCS.

This chapter will explore how, especially in light of CCLC history, the FPCS serves as an example of the neoliberal project that endeavors to channel hope for change out of democratic institutions within struggling communities in search of better options. Furthermore, this chapter will also explain the challenges that the effort has faced in gaining momentum, and how those challenges are also the product of neoliberal politics of disposability and territoriality.

### **Rationale: Why a Charter School?**

The idea to establish a K-8 charter school within the city of Poughkeepsie came about over lunch between former Circle of Courage Community Center (CCLC) administrators, Frank Mulhern and Dwight Paine on afternoon in early 2011. Since the decline of the CCLC, both remained disappointed with the educational circumstances within the district. As Paine described in an interview:

You must know all the statistics...the 50 percent graduation rate, a FOCUS school district because [most] of the schools are in the bottom 10 percent, middle and high school are in the bottom 5 percent of the state. Amazing diversity. But it obviously wasn't working and there were too many kids getting lost. And kids that we had great success with those first two years [at the CCLC] didn't get support after we left. And some of those kids are dead. Some of those kids are in jail. One great kid was in jail for attempted murderer. So we thought you know let's try and start a charter school. Use the circle of courage as a model and hopefully we can make a difference. (Personal communication, January 22, 2014)

Because the vision for CCLC was never actualized under direct PCSD control and oversight, both Paine and Mulhern currently feel that in order to successfully create a better educational option for students and families within the city of Poughkeepsie, a school must to be created with autonomy, while still remaining accountable to state standards and state oversight. Similar to the CCLC, the FPCS effort also endeavors to de-territorialize the district through a process of territoriality that privileges the needs of low-income students of color on the north side of the city. However, as will be discussed, the FPCS effort has encountered similar and yet

different challenges from the CCLC effort due to neoliberal abandonment, the politics of disposability, and the deep territorialization of Poughkeepsie along race and class lines.

The founding group as a whole cited several important advantages in going forward with a charter school as a new educational territory within the city and outside of PCSD direct control. First, a charter school would allow for relatively more autonomy and flexibility than that granted for traditional public schools. Consequentially, that autonomy and flexibility would allow the FPCS to depart from the aforementioned difficulties of creating change within the PCSD. According to the founding group members, the potential outcomes of autonomy and flexibility could manifest in several ways, including different hiring practices and salary policies for teachers, the implementation of an egalitarian leadership model amongst teachers and administrators, the development of creative pedagogies, and the cultivation of a more student-centered and asset based approach to education. These arguments regarding the benefits of charter school autonomy are in line with the general market-based ideologies that guide the nationwide neoliberal restructuring of public education (Chubb & Moe, 1988).

A second advantage of the charter school model, according to FPCS founding group members, is the smaller school size. A smaller school community would be beneficial for teaching and learning, as well as fostering a strong sense of positive school culture and community. According to application documents, the FPCS would cap its student enrollment at 348 in its K-8 program by the 2017-18 academic year (Letter of Intent to Apply, 2014). When compared to the student enrollment of existing PCSD schools like Krieger Elementary (596 enrolled students) and Poughkeepsie Middle School (968 enrolled students) during the 2011-12 academic year, the potential difference in student enrollment between FPCS and the PCSD public schools is significant (Poughkeepsie City School District Report Card, 2011-12). Finally,

writing and reviewing a charter can help to maintain and strengthen a positive school culture and community (Powers, 2009, p. 79). Jane Ebaugh, the FPCS literacy specialist, stated that the creation of a charter holds the potential for a “blank slate” upon which the founders can deliberately form new goals for student learning and community building. Ebaugh noted that overall a charter school is essentially a chance for a “fresh start” in the city. She explained how “these schools [PCSD traditional public schools] have been in existence for years, and people get entrenched” in discouragement, repetition, and regulation (Personal communication, February 17, 2014). McGill echoed these sentiments, and added that the ability to create and reflect upon a mission statement and shared goals will be an energizing force that re-aligns priorities to be geared towards the interests of students:

We might need something like a charter school to bring everybody [in the district] back to their senses. What are we doing here? *What are we doing here?* What is the point? Why is this happening? And taking responsibility instead of trying to blame everybody else, you know take responsibility for what’s happening. (Personal communication, February 25, 2014)

All of these reasons to create a charter school were clear to Mulhern and Paine, and the two decided to reach out to those who felt similarly about what they understood as an educational crisis within the city. Those interested and committed would later become the founding group members of the FPCS. As the official FPCS website states, the founding group members are “highly qualified” and “made up of both city and non-city residents with decades of experience in education and community affairs” (Four Pillars Charter School, 2012). Under the leadership of Mulhern and Paine, this group set out to develop the mission and vision of the FPCS.

### **Mission and Vision**

The foundational “Four Pillars” of FPCS are the critical components of the mission, vision, and values of the potential school community. According to the FPCS official website,

the founding group members developed the “Four Pillars” as a direct response to “the historical needs of the children of Poughkeepsie” (Four Pillars Charter School Official Website, 2012). More specifically, the mission of FPCS is geared toward students “who are at risk of dropping out of school prior to high school graduation.” The four pillars that have been identified to support those students are 1) literacy in all academic areas, 2) parental involvement, 3) community involvement, and 4) character education through the Circle of Courage philosophy. Throughout the initial 2012 Prospectus Request, the founders stress the importance of constructing these four pillars, especially parental involvement, in ways that are attuned to the realities of families within the city, particularly families from the north side. For example, families would be provided with “creative options” to be involved in their child’s education (Prospectus Request, 2013). Paine emphasized the regular phone calls, house visits, and holding “events and meetings when [families] can go, rather than just scheduling it when you don’t know [if families] can go,” as creative options that could be open for families in order for them to be involved and informed regarding their child’s education. As the mission statement reads, the four pillars have been identified and developed specifically to offer academic and social support to students in order to provide them with “a thorough and enriched start to their educational careers” (Four Pillars Charter School Official Website, 2012).

However, the long-term vision of the FPCS is not merely to provide this support only to those students enrolled at the FPCS, but to all students throughout the district. In this way, the FPCS vision would facilitate a healthier and stronger school district as a whole, similar to the CCLC vision, and the overall original vision of charter schools to improve all traditional public schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). While founders feel that autonomy from the district is critical to FPCS success, the ultimate goal is that FPCS would act as a model to the rest of the district—a

model that the district would ideally adopt given the success of the FPCS program. The idea of a charter school as a lab school for the purpose of ultimately improving all traditional public schools within a district is fairly common within the mission and vision of community initiated charter schools (Meham & Lytle, 2006). According to FPCS founders, the ultimate purpose of the FPCS would be to offer strong educational options for all students on the north and south sides of the city that would be equal in quality to those educational options within the town of Poughkeepsie. In this sense, the purpose of the FPCS would be to de-territorialize the district. “We’re not trying to take over,” Paine explained. “We’re trying to use a model we think will work, and we want to show that and have the district take it on” (Personal communication, January 22, 2014). This vision to impact the entire district is supported by two principle factors. First, the FPCS would only be K-8, and therefore graduating students will most likely return to the district to enroll at Poughkeepsie High School. Second, the initial application details plans to share certain resources with and open events to students and families within PCSD traditional public schools. For example, the FPCS “Parent University” program will invite all students’ families within the PCSD to participate and learn about important resources for navigating homework help, course selections, and college readiness. Thus, the FPCS vision is grounded in the academic achievement of all students within the city of Poughkeepsie.

The FPCS founding group members explained that even if the FPCS model is not officially adopted, the FPCS could still support traditional public schools in the district through innovation contagion. The hypothesis behind innovation contagion is that if public schools are competing against charter schools for resources, public schools must rise to the challenge that charter schools could potentially present. Therefore, in keeping with the market-based logic of innovation contagion, this competition would force public schools to create better educational

opportunities for students and families. Some of the FPCS founding members believe that innovation contagion may be the key to jumpstarting action and change within the district. As McGill noted, the potential presence and success of FPCS could be seen as an “earthquake to get a handle on perspective” and “a challenge to the system to get your act together” (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). However, to use the market-based logic of innovation contagion as a means towards de-territorialization of educational space is inherently contradictory in that charter school innovation does not guarantee the public a right to the city—instead it forces the public to compete for that right (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). In this sense, the potential reliance on innovation contagion reveals a tension and conflict within the FPCS effort regarding authentic de-territorialization. However, relying on innovation-contagion is not the ultimate goal of FPCS founders, who hope that the district adopts the FPCS model. Ultimately, whether it is through a district adoption of the FPCS model or through innovation contagion, the vision for FPCS demonstrates the intent and purpose to provide better educational opportunities not only for *some* students within the district, but for all PCSD students.

However, the possibility remains that the FPCS effort would not be able to provide better educational opportunities for all students due to potential district resistance to the FPCS model, or due to the potential inability of the PCSD to compete with the pressures of innovation contagion due to the ways in which they have historically been abandoned through neoliberal social order, and thus are underserved and under-supported. Furthermore, it is generally uncommon that charter schools develop partnerships to share best practices with traditional public schools within the same district due to “intensified competition [between schools] regarding test scores” (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 55). Therefore, the founding members have also discussed alternative plans for future FPCS students who will graduate from 8<sup>th</sup> grade and

confront the possibility of returning to the district that has not adopted the FPCS guiding philosophies or other innovational practices. Although Mulhern explained the ways in which the four pillars can “provide educational guardianship” for future FPCS graduates to succeed academically at Poughkeepsie High School, the some members of the founding group have also discussed the possibility of expanding the FPCS K-8 model to include a high school (D. Paine, personal communication, January 22, 2014). Alternatively, Mulhern has considered looking beyond the FPCS and the PCSD in order to create possibilities for eighth grade graduates. This might consist of developing partnerships with Dutchess County private schools, such as Our Lady of Lourdes High School, John A. Coleman Catholic High School, or Poughkeepsie Day School. These partnerships would develop potentially at the expense of the continued marginalization of Poughkeepsie’s traditional public schools. Overall, the details of the FPCS vision regarding collaboration with PCSD remain malleable at this stage in the development of the effort. However, what is clear is that the FPCS founders have an honest intention and goal of creating better educational opportunities for students who have the right to more than what their underfunded, underserved public schools have to offer. At the same time, as the following section will reveal, there are a multiplicity of challenges presented in this attempt to create a new educational territory for low-income students of color within a city that has been so deeply territorialized along race and class lines.

### **Challenges of the FPCS Effort**

While the FPCS founding group has demonstrated thorough and comprehensive work to create a mission and vision, the group has struggled to lift the overall effort off the ground within the city. More specifically, the FPCS effort has been met with resistance from within the PCSD



and, perhaps more significantly, the effort has struggled to reach out to and inspire interest within low-income communities and families of color on the north side of Poughkeepsie.

**District Challenges.** Similar to the resistance that the CCLC received, the FPCS effort has faced substantial pushback from the PCSD administration. The primary reason for this resistance is the financial stress that the district is under as a whole. According to Mulhern, those opposed to FPCS within the district feel that to go forward with the effort would be to “give away money” (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). This fear within the district comes from the fact that if approved, the district would lose a percentage of the state funds allocated per-student. If the FPCS goes forward, McGill explained how this financial strain might cause the district to struggle financially, as finances are already strained. However, in alignment with New York State mandate, the FPCS would only receive 80 percent of the district funds allocated per student. Furthermore, if the FPCS were to rent a building from the district, the FPCS would receive substantially less than 80 percent of the district funds allocated per student. “We were close one time and then the former superintendent [Dr. Laval Wilson] here in Poughkeepsie convinced them [NYSED] that we would break the bank if [FPCS is approved],” Mulhern recounted. “And it was such a lie because we would actually be renting their buildings and giving them 20 percent back. And we were taking kids they wouldn’t have to be responsible for....but when you have bureaucracies built onto it, you know that’s never enough” (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). Mulhern theorizes that this tension regarding funding could be credited to the fact that charter schools were intended for large urban school districts that, due to their size, have naturally larger budgets than small urban school districts like the PCSD, and therefore have more flexibility with funding allocations. Regardless of the differences between large or small urban districts, the reality remains that the PCSD, a district already underfunded

and underserved due to the neoliberal abandonment, will lose a percentage of funding if the FPCS effort goes forward.

Mulhern has also personally faced resistance from teachers within the PCSD. While it is true that many PCSD teachers have expressed interest in the effort and have contacted Mulhern and Paine, there are also those teachers, especially teachers active within the union, who oppose the charter school movement. The following anecdote from Mulhern speaks to this issue:

I was at a Latin festival and another festival, a jazz festival maybe in Dolores Park handing out fliers for the charter school, and there were my friends. They had a tent for the Poughkeepsie Public School Teachers Association (PPSTA). And the president gave me the coldest reception. He said, 'Frank we're into *public schools*,' I said it is a public school. 'And we're into kids,' I said so am I! We should partner up. (Personal communication, January 31, 2014)

While this resistance to and skepticism of charter schools can be found within groups of PCSD teachers, it is important to acknowledge that a similar sentiment exists within the FPCS founding group itself. For example, McGill is not an advocate of charter schools, as she explained to me within the first few moments of our interview. At the same time, she still sees a real and significant need to turn around the general inequities and injustices active within the district, and an alternative solution for children and families must be provided. However, as evidenced in the community and family outreach challenges, this strong conviction for new educational options only stretches so far in getting the effort off the ground.

**Community Outreach Challenges.** Throughout the FPCS effort, outreach to low-income community members and families of color on the north side of the city has proven challenging for the founding group. Outreach poses a major issue to the FPCS effort, especially given the fact that parental and community involvement are two out of the four pillars upon which the school would be founded. The founding group members have not only had trouble in reaching out to general community members to do the hard work supporting, building, and

sustaining the effort within the city. They have also had trouble reaching out to families of children who the FPCS has sought to serve.

The founding group has found that community members are interested in the idea of a charter school in the city, but less interested in helping to build and support the effort in its developing stages. This has been demonstrated at community forums and through the official FPCS Facebook page. The group has held two community forums, the advertisements for one forum as demonstrated by Figure 9. As is made evident in the bi-lingual advertising and the north side forum venues, the advertisements made efforts to cater to the black and Latino families on the city's north side. However, the community forums were met with varied degrees of attendance. Those who did attend were mostly teachers within the PCSD or adults whose children are grown and no longer enrolled at the PCSD public schools. Although Mulhern felt that those in attendance were "super and interested," the "momentum" needed to sustain the effort was more or less absent because most who attended the forums thought the FPCS was already an established school. When they realized that the school was not yet established and required foundational groundwork to build momentum and gain NYSED approval, the interest died down (K. Lodge, personal communication, February 24, 2014). Similarly, many parents who "liked" the FPCS Facebook page were under the impression that the FPCS was currently seeking students to enroll in the next academic year. As McGill noted, "most people don't want to be a part of [the] process. They want to be a part in seeing what the result is, and whether or not they want to be bothered with that" (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). Furthermore, Lodge explained how some interested parties, most often PCSD teachers, were hesitant to put their names forward in support of FPCS because of their close ties to the district, and the district's general opposition to the effort (Personal communication, February 24, 2014).

While the founding group is now comprised of eleven people, more general support and action throughout the community is required to build effective momentum. All founding group members have limited time and resources available to dedicate to the effort when they have full time jobs, families, and other responsibilities. Unfortunately, this is even more so the case for low-income families of color on the north side.

Beyond general community outreach challenges, the challenge of reaching out to low-income families of color on the north side has been particularly debilitating for the effort. Instead, the founding members are seeing interest from families on the south side. These families are most often white and are not a part of the “target community” for the FPCS effort (Four Pillars Charter School 2012). “One of the obstacles we ran into is getting the south side really fired up,” Paine explained,

Frankly our interest is less in the kids from the south side and more about kids from the north side because the needs are so much greater there. And although we’ve had a number of forums, a number of meetings and a number of efforts to reach out, it’s been hard to get families from the north side to come because of all of the obstacles they have. It isn’t a lack of interest. [Families are] the missing piece in the whole process because everyone else is very excited, administrators, businesses, non-profits, you know very, very excited. I think they would be as excited and see this as a great opportunity for their kids but we haven’t found a way to sort of get at it yet. That’s been frustrating. But that’s been the issue all along in the city of Poughkeepsie.

(Personal communication, January 22, 2014.)

Paine’s quote speaks to one of the key differences between the CCLC and the FPCS efforts. The mission of these two schools in regards to their “target communities” are similar in that they were or are intended for low-income youth of color who are struggling within the PCSD. However, the recruitment and enrollment strategies that the two schools were or are able to use are markedly different. The CCLC received students who were directly enrolled in its program because they had been discharged from the district into other educational facilities. On the other hand, the FPCS must recruit district students independently, as it would be autonomous from the district, and is not explicitly meant to serve students who have been discharged. As

Paine has explained, this has left the outreach strategies for the FPCS to be a more difficult endeavor, as the interest in the FPCS is coming predominantly from white parents on the south side of the city (Personal communication, January 22, 2014).

The interest in the FPCS from white south side families was further exhibited in Lodge's experience of creating the official FPCS Facebook page, intended for outreach to families. In the following excerpt from an interview with Lodge, it is clear that the FPCS outreach efforts were not reaching the families of those "at-risk" students that the mission and vision of FPCS is ultimately geared towards:

Now initially when I started with the Facebook page ... there was a group of parents who were interested, and they were mostly non-minority parents that were interested in the charter school. Most of the minority parents didn't want anything. Maybe a few of them liked the Facebook page...because I would see who would like the Facebook page and it was definitely parents that probably had time to be on the computer. (Personal communication, February 24, 2014)

Lodge's experience with the Facebook page proved discouraging. These predominantly white parents from the south side parallel the white parents who were interested in creating and maintain the "two-tier educational philosophy" within the district between white students and students of color. Perhaps it could even be understood that those parents see the FPCS as an opportunity similar to the likes of Spackenkill High School in 1956. The fact that the FPCS could become a site of furthered racial segregation is supported further by national studies that claim charter schools are "more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the country" (Orfield 2010). Despite this interest from white parents, the FPCS founders are adamant about creating a school for underserved students of color within the city. "I don't need the rich kids. I don't need the white kids," Mulhern insisted (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). This is especially true for Mulhern given the New York State mandate that the student demographics of a charter school must be proportional to those demographics of the city in which it is located.

The interests of white families from the south side illuminates one of the major risks that charter schools pose: cream skimming. Within the charter school movement, cream skimming refers to the ways in which charter schools often attract those students who, as McGill noted, have “the most potential for character development, responsible parents and so forth.” In nationwide studies, it has been found that those families who take advantage of school choice most often have more relative advantages than those families who do not, in terms of economic, social or cultural capital (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2011). This common pattern, intentional or not on the part of charter school administration, further demonstrates the ways in which charter schools are manifestations of the politics of disposability. The fact that the FPCS effort is already demonstrating evidence of unintended cream-skimming during their outreach efforts poses a significant issue for the FPCS efforts’ mission and vision to educate the most underserved and high-needs students in the district.

However, the founding group is still making efforts to reach out to parents from the north side communities they aspire to work with. The most prominent example of this effort is from Mulhern, who was contacted by several young women whom he taught as students in Poughkeepsie, and who “are all mothers now” in their mid-twenties. “Some of them have been through quite a bit...but their kids are 1 or 2, [and] their kids are gonna need school” (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). These women have shown great interest in the FPCS effort and Mulhern asked them to support the effort by reaching out to other north side parents of young children who may be interested. Mulhern feels these women will be “the strength” of the FPCS effort. “It can’t be about an idea that Dwight [Paine], Allison [Withers], myself and many others have. It has to be the mother on Garden Street who says, ‘I am not sending my child to Warring...I need an option.’” (Personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Because capturing the interest of and maintaining contact with families from the north side of Poughkeepsie has proven difficult, it is critical to ask why this may be the case. In general, the challenges of reaching out to members of the city community may be generally exacerbated by the fact that the FPCS founding group meetings have been held in Pleasant Valley, NY which is inaccessible through public transportation (K. Lodge, personal communication, February 24, 2014). However, through a more structural lens, the challenge of reaching out to low-income families of color on Poughkeepsie's north side are, according to McGill and Lodge, located in two principal sources. The first source is one I have touched on throughout this discussion—the fact that many low income parents of color from the north side are harder to reach because of “environmental factors” that they struggle with day to day, and the lack of institutional support these families receive (K. Lodge, personal communication, February 24, 2014). As Lodge explained, “There’s just not enough really coming from the minority community to really make this effort stand out because their concern is just putting food on the table. It’s not really...starting a school and you know picketing and all this stuff because they need jobs and to be working and working two or three jobs” (Personal communication, February 24, 2014). This source of the outreach challenge is closely linked to the reasons that those interviewed presented regarding why it is difficult to create change within the district.

The second source of the outreach challenge is the fraught dynamics between families of color and educational administrators and, more specifically, white administrators. Again, this source of the outreach challenge is also closely linked to the reasons regarding why it is difficult to make change in the district. It is significant that the two men leading the effort—Paine and Mulhern—are both white men, neither of whom are community members on the north side of Poughkeepsie. Despite their experience working within the district in various capacities, their

positionalities in regards to race and community have had a substantial impact on the FPCS effort. McGill explained how this has played out in their outreach efforts:

One of the obstacles is that both of the people who are heading this committee—they're all white. You see? And that automatically puts in a level of mistrust for those people who do come to the forums. And even the fact that I've been here for over thirty years and have been a big critic of the district for the whole time, I'm not heading the committee. Even though people know me, you know, I'm not heading the committee or somebody else of color is not heading the committee or co-anchoring the committee or whatever the case may be. So you know [community members say] 'What makes you think that I should trust them?' And on the other hand they're saying well maybe if Carmen [McGill] feels comfortable with them and trusts them, then maybe I could too. So it's a two-edge sword kind of a thing. So I don't know, there's no easy answer, there's no easy answer at all. (Personal communication, February 25, 2014)

Despite the fact that McGill supports the FPCS effort as a black community member, a former PTA president, and a FPCS founding group member, her support, as she explained, may only extend so far. Dr. Pittman's perspective on the FPCS is an example of this skepticism from Poughkeepsie's black community. McGill initially contacted Dr. Pittman to see if he would be interested in being involved with the FPCS effort as a city leader with a strong background in educational administration and someone who is generally well known throughout the city and within the district. Dr. Pittman recalls his thought process after McGill contacted him to be a part of the effort:

So I looked around to try to get a sense where is [the FPCS effort] coming from...is it grassroots is it people from the community? And then when I found out that it wasn't but it was sort of...I think I call them these social...social advocates or philanthropists or whatever benevolent people who want to see change, I wasn't really passionate about it, that it didn't come from a place indigenous to people and generations of their people who kind of struggle with the system...The Four Pillars people, I don't know these individuals but yeah it's definitely going to be hard. It's just hard for the minister and the counsel person who grew up in the neighborhood then certainly it's going to be hard for that white person who is coming to say I have the answer or this is good for you. (Personal communication, February 4, 2014)

Again, it seems that the source of this mistrust is the aforementioned "adversarial relationship" that has existed for decades between parents and school personnel. According to Lodge, also a member of the city's black community, families of color are skeptical about the intentions of and motivations of white people who are not from the north side of the city. "It's



about trust,” Lodge explained, “And parents, you know those I’ve spoken to, don’t really trust people that come from outside, people that might be starting this initiative based on anger because of something that happened to them in the district” (Personal communication, February 24, 2014). In other words, community members may be aware of the dissolution of the CCLC and in turn presume that the FPCS is some type of vengeful, self-motivated effort pitched against the PCSD. While this theory does not seem to be the case according to the expressed intentions of Paine and Mulhern to serve low-income students of color, at this stage their intentions seem to be beside the point. “[Mulhern and Paine] already empathize with the population,” Lodge explained, and they are trying to offer a new educational solution. However, “it’s trying to get the parents to trust them” and to see that “what [FPCS] is doing is for the benefit of *their* kids” and not, once again, another effort to make money off the backs of children. This has proven decidedly difficult. As Lodge noted, “If people don’t feel that you’re really genuine, I don’t think they’re really going to jump on board” (Personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Another issue located within this distrust of white reformers is the possibility that those on the north side might see the FPCS as an altruistic effort. “There are a lot of people who are liberals who say, ‘Let’s help these people,’” McGill explained, “instead of, well, let’s help these people help themselves. You know? You can’t do it for me. It has to be an effort that I do and that you help me with” (Personal communication, February 25, 2014). While the spirit of the FPCS mission and vision may not be altruistic, the true intentions may not be clear and, in some instances, may not be significant if coming from white people outside of the community.

The paradox of this potential distrust of white altruism, as both McGill and Dr. Pittman noted, is that not all members of the north side community see themselves as agents of change due to reasons rooted in their own historic and generational oppression. “Often times people are

looking for a savior...it's hard for people to see themselves as being that leadership, and hard to create that sense of it's about all of us, you have a talent and a resource to offer," Dr. Pittman explained (Personal communication, February 4, 2014). Of course, white people and white privilege are heavily implicated if not entirely responsible for the construction of this dynamic. McGill noted that the white savior complex is so common because, due to their racial privilege, white people "have no difficulty in stepping on lines of demarcation." Of course, there have been many community grassroots efforts to bring about change in the PCSD that have been championed by members of the black and Latino communities on the north side. For example, in 1993 Dr. Pittman was involved in an effort through the NAACP to push forward a critical multicultural curriculum within the district (E. Pittman, personal communication, February 4, 2014). However, this initiative, like many that aim for social justice and authentic de-territorialization, never was actualized within the district, and the current circumstances of low graduation rates and standardized learning have continued.

The FPCS effort has now spanned over the course of 3 years, from 2011 to 2014. The founding group submitted the latest edition of the letter of intent to apply to the NYSED on February 3, 2014. This Letter of Intent outlines an overall history of the FPCS effort, which includes four different letters of intent and one application withdrawn after "useful feedback". As noted in this history of the effort, the stop and go nature of the effort has been attributed to a need to schedule more community outreach events. While the 2014 letter of intent states that as a result of these events, "additional support from the community was evident," FPCS founding group members admit to the challenges that have unrelentingly persisted in regard to reaching out to low-income families of color on the north side (Letter of Intent to Apply, 2014). The outreach challenges are clear, yet complex to solve, and ultimately rooted in tensions and

divisions based in race and community. Due to this reality, it has been difficult for founders to build a community-driven and grassroots effort. All founders agree that the FPCS should not and cannot go forward without community support, yet many the founders do believe that there is a need that persists within the community. As Lodge explained, “We might feel that the community needs a school. Maybe they don’t. Maybe the parents feel, let’s just work with what we have. Let’s focus on making Poughkeepsie schools better. Have parents been asked that? I don’t know. Maybe that’s something that they should be asked...We all think we know what people want. Sometimes we just don’t” (Personal communication, February 24, 2014).

### **Next Steps in the Effort**

The stop and go trajectory and the challenges of the FPCS effort has left the founding group members, most notably Mulhern and Paine, unsure of their next move to create better educational opportunities for youth on the north side of Poughkeepsie. In fact, at this stage it remains unclear whether or not the FPCS effort will go forward beyond the 2014 Letter of Intent. This lack of clarity in terms of the effort’s direction has also been heavily facilitated by the new PCSD superintendent, Dr. Nicole Williams.

As Dr. Laval Wilson’s successor, Williams accepted the position as superintendent in August 2013 after serving as the deputy superintendent for academic services for St. Louis Public Schools in Missouri. Williams’ dynamic leadership philosophy is grounded in community collaboration and a zero tolerance policy for practices unaligned with a vision for PCSD “educational excellence.” Williams elaborated on this vision in an interview with the Hudson Valley Reporter:

My vision is that every child from all walks of life has a rich and valuable experience every day that prepares them for life. We need to work in collaboration with every member of the community for a high quality of education. Excellence of education is what we do and why we do it everyday. (Maker, 2013)

At the center of Williams' philosophy for educational excellence is a child-centered approach. This approach has not gone un-noticed by members of the founding group. McGill found that the unofficial district "mantra" of "what's good for me to make money off the backs of these children" may be slowly phasing out in terms of every day practices, beliefs and attitudes within the district due to Williams' leadership as superintendent. Through an intensive and effective process of community outreach and developing higher standards for the PCSD as a whole, Williams is attempting to bring fast and radical change to the district. McGill noted how some within the district feel that she is moving too fast, while others see her as capable and effective for producing better results within PCSD for families and students. What is undeniable, it seems, is her "amazing energy" that she brings to her work and to the district. "I don't know when she sleeps," Paine joked (Personal communication, January 22, 2014).

Some of the FPCS founders see the new practices and principles that Williams advocates for as similar to those practices and principles behind the FPCS effort. In fact, Paine explained that Williams has already expressed interest in more or less "adopting the FPCS model," and has gone as far as asking Paine to join a strategic planning committee for the district. This effort from Williams has demonstrated promising potential, leaving Paine in a "conflict" as to where to primarily focus his efforts (D. Paine, personal communication, January 22, 2014). McGill also explained that Williams and the change she does or does not bring to the district would "also help to determine whether or not the four pillars charter school is necessary" (Personal communication, February 25, 2014).

However because time is a strong determining factor, the FPCS founding group cannot wait—in the literal sense—to see what Williams brings forth. Mulhern argued that despite the strong goals and best efforts that Williams brings to the district, there might be other district

administrators who are not aligned with her child-centered, fast-paced vision for success and excellence. For this reason, the FPCS founding team is pushing forward—despite the NYSED rejection of the most recent Letter of Intent to Apply. As Paine explained,

The Letter of Intent was not accepted. Bizarre since it was basically the same letter that had been accepted [by the NYSED] twice before. Nonetheless, Frank and I are putting together a high-powered team, to meet on May 8<sup>th</sup> [2014], to tackle the application. We intend to apply this August, to open in [September] 2015. We have learned much, think we have some ways to involved the north side, and we can't let go, even if we are perceived as white altruists. The youth in Poughkeepsie deserve more than what they are presently receiving.

(Personal communication, April 30, 2014)

According to Paine, hope still remains for the actualization of the FPCS effort. If the founding group can build a strong application and strengthen outreach efforts to north side families, it may be likely that the FPCS becomes an available educational option for families and students in the city of Poughkeepsie. However, if the stop and go trajectory of the effort continues, some FPCS founding group members, such as Mulhern, are unsure of how much further they will push the FPCS effort. “I’ll probably call up Dr. Williams and say let me join you and kick some tail—which is a possibility,” Mulhern said (Personal communication, January 31, 2014). In the event that the FPCS does not go forward beyond the submission of the forthcoming application, it seems likely that the vision to create stronger, healthier and de-territorialized educational spaces within Poughkeepsie could be, at least in part, actualized under the leadership of Dr. Williams.

Lodge felt that this partnership with Dr. Williams could present a good alternative for the FPCS founding group because, at the end of the day, she wants to see better outcomes for children in her community—no matter the source. “I think maybe we can work together instead of doing something apart because maybe that’s not what is really needed,” Lodge explained. “It’s okay to say, you know what, this is not working. If we really care about the kids in the city of Poughkeepsie, let’s work with Dr. Williams on something. You know I still care about my

community” (Personal communication, February 24, 2014). The rest of the FPCS founding group members echoed these same sentiments as well. As the founders see it, the youth of Poughkeepsie deserve more than what is currently available to them in the PCSD traditional public schools, and these circumstances must be improved by any means necessary.

## Chapter 5

### **Conclusion and Implications: A Critical Return to Democratic and Public Institutions**

Throughout the contemporary landscape of public education reform, teachers, families and community members are finding it increasingly difficult to imagine or create positive, equitable, and collaborative change in their communities through their traditional public schools. This difficulty stems directly from the market-driven neoliberal abandonment of public institutions at large. The policies, discourses and ideologies of neoliberal abandonment—rooted in structural racism and classism—operate collectively in order to violate the social contract, expand social inequity, deny the right to the city, reduce public faith in democratic and public institutions, and ultimately territorialize and divide what could be democratic and public space. Overall, neoliberal abandonment has left public institutions—especially those that serve racially or socioeconomically marginalized, i.e. disposable, peoples—to slowly deteriorate and/or collapse under the structural oppressions through which they have been forced to operate. This ultimately results in the deep territorialization of public space along race and class lines. In this way, the project of neoliberal abandonment seeks to transform public institutions from potential sites of neighborhood collaboration, democracy, and equity into sites of hyper individuality, disposability, and social inequity.

This transformation of public space and public institutions compels the public to re-direct its hope and vision for positive, equitable and collaborative change out of public space and into private territory. This re-direction is exemplified through the history of Poughkeepsie's multi-scale territorialization along race and class lines, the CCLC effort and its downfall, and the FPCS effort and the challenges it currently faces. In asking the FPCS founders why they feel that it is important to create a new, autonomous educational territory within the city of Poughkeepsie, I

found their answers to be clear, simple, and unanimous: the traditional public schools of the PCSD are failing to meet student needs. Both the CCLC and the FPCS efforts were initiated with a hope and vision for creating better educational opportunities, and a stronger, healthier and ultimately de-territorialized city school district as a whole. However, both efforts were movements away from traditional, democratic and public institutions. The CCLC shifted away in the sense that it was established outside of the traditional public schools because it was meant to serve students whom the traditional public schools could no longer support. After the CCLC eventually closed due to the deterioration of its community, lack of district support, and alleged financial abuse, two former CCLC administrators sought to establish the city's first ever charter school. The FPCS effort signifies a further shift away from traditional institutions of public education in the sense that it would be a charter school, accountable to and yet outside of the direct control of the PCSD. The trajectory of the CCLC and the following FPCS effort both operated upon the following logic: the only way to de-territorialize public educational space—that is, to foster equitable power dynamics, collaborative democracy, and ultimately stronger educational experiences for all city youth—is to further territorialize educational space—that is, to create new educational territories further outside of traditional democratic and public institutions.

However, I argue that this logic is inherently flawed and, furthermore, a product of the neoliberal regime of common sense. To attempt to de-territorialize public educational space through the creation of new educational territories will not work because it only perpetuates and validates territorialization and the structural racism and classism upon which territorialization operates. For example, if the FPCS were to gain state approval and open its doors to the city of Poughkeepsie, the borders that would surround FPCS would implicitly deny low-income



students of color the right to de-territorialized educational space, the right to strong democratic and public neighborhood schools, and the right to same educational experiences as their white, middle class peers in suburban school districts. Yet the contradictions inherent in further territorializing educational space have already been made clear through the outreach challenges that the FPCS effort has encountered from its beginning. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason as to why this outreach has been difficult for the FPCS founders, it is clear that the reasons— multifaceted and intersectional—are located within the historical and current day racist and classist territorialization of Poughkeepsie. Even at this stage in the FPCS effort, it seems unlikely that an effort to create a new educational territory will be able to holistically and democratically de-territorialize educational space due to the fact that Poughkeepsie is already so deeply fractured, divided, territorialized, and coping with the politics of disposability. Therefore, the territorialization of Poughkeepsie, the creation of CCLC, and the attempt to establish FPCS collectively reveal a paradox within the contemporary landscape of public education reform: the neoliberal regime of common sense at once tells the public to create positive, equitable and collective change in today's educational systems through private space, while also acting as the primary obstacle towards actualizing private spaces that are realistically capable of creating equitable, collective and, most importantly, community-driven educational change.

This paradox within the contemporary landscape of public education reform signifies a call to return to traditional democratic and public institutions, and use them as a means to fight for critical, radical, and grassroots education reform. If the hope and vision is to collectively create better educational systems for youth who are otherwise underserved and are deemed disposable, the solution cannot come from the creation of private territorial enclaves within educational space. Instead, the solution can be realized through a return to, a critical re-

examination of, and ultimate action within traditional democratic and public educational institutions. Of course, the success of such a return is difficult to imagine when traditional democratic and public schools are understood as dead ends, as devoid of hope or promise, as inherent sites of social inequity—but they need not be. Neoliberal abandonment has blinded the public to the possibilities that still exist within traditional democratic and public schools and educational institutions. While it is true that throughout their history, public schools have struggled to actualize equitable democracy for students and school communities, public schools still hold the possibility of creating strong educational opportunities not only for white youth, or middle class youth, or those youth only lucky enough to escape their own disposability, but for *all* youth. This possibility exists within public schools because, at their foundational level, they are sites of collaboration, community, collective power, and ultimately sites through which all community voices have the potential to be heard.

As educational scholar Pauline Lipman has asserted, charter schools do not represent a new frontier for equitable, socially just, and de-territorialized education reform, but instead “represent an urban call to action” to critically examine and combat the “persistent failure of public schools to provide equitable, meaningful education in [urban] communities” (Lipman, 2011, p. 121). That is, the FPCS effort represents a call to re-imagine equitable educational experiences for youth in existing PCSD schools, and to critically re-examine and begin to deconstruct the racism and classism that has for so long burdened and territorialized traditional democratic and public educational space within the PCSD. For if we, as actors within contemporary public education reform, seek to dismantle the structural oppressions that divide us, confine us, and produce inequities in our public educational systems, we must critically engage with the spaces of those oppressions in order to do so—not move further away from them.

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Table 1:

## Information about Interviewees

Interviewee	Resident of	Professional History/Relation to FPCS Effort	Race
Frank Mulhern	Rhinebeck, NY	A school administrator with 25 years of experience, Mulhern has previously worked as a Special Education Coordinator in Poughkeepsie City School District and in the Hudson City School District. He was a former administrator for the Circle of Courage Learning Center. Additionally, he was the CEO/Superintendent for Anderson School in Dutchess County from 1987-1997. He is highly involved in developing Parent University Programs in small city school district. He is currently the director of PPS (pupil personnel services) at Beacon City School District.	White
Dwight Paine	LaGrange, NY	A retired teacher, administrator, and educator since 1968, Paine was a former administrator of the Circle of Courage Learning Center. Prior to that, Paine worked at a teacher and Mathematics department chairperson at the Poughkeepsie Day School. He has also served as an assistant to the Poughkeepsie City School District superintendent, and currently serves as a volunteer tutor in the Poughkeepsie City School District.	White
Allison Withers	LaGrange, NY	A retired teacher, administrator and educator since 1964 at the Poughkeepsie Day School (PDS), Withers served as the former Foreign Languages department chairperson and the head of middle school at PDS. She currently serves as a public library board member and an ESL literacy volunteer in the city of Poughkeepsie.	White
Carmen McGill	City of Poughkeepsie	A resident of the city of Poughkeepsie, a community activist, former PTA president, and parent of children who attended Poughkeepsie city schools, McGill currently serves as an associate director of admission at Dutchess Community College.	Black
Kaidyah Omnae Lodge	City of Poughkeepsie	A former teacher, child protective specialist, and parent within the district, Lodge currently serves as a case manager at Youth One Stop, Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce	Black
Jane Ebaugh	Rhinebeck, NY	A former teacher of over 30 years, Ebaugh formerly served as a reading teacher and special education administrator in NYS public schools. She co-developed <i>Steps Into Reading</i> , a reading program and assessment for “at risk” kindergarten and first grade students, which was validated by New York State’s Sharing Successful Programs.	White
Dr. Edward Pittman	City of Poughkeepsie	A former teacher, president of the Poughkeepsie City School Board, and active community member, Ed Pittman is currently the Associate Dean of the College at Vassar College.	Black

Note: From, “Letter of Intent to Apply,” (2014) *Four Pillars Charter School*: Personal communications



Table 2

Student Demographic Data, Poughkeepsie City School District, 2011-2012

<b>PCSD School</b>	<b>Percent Eligible for Free Lunch</b>	<b>Percent Eligible for Reduced Price Lunch</b>	<b>Percent American Indian or Alaska Native</b>	<b>Percent Black or African American</b>	<b>Percent Hispanic or Latino</b>	<b>Percent Asian or Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander</b>	<b>Percent White</b>
G.W. Krieger Elementary School	54	9	1	50	21	2	26
Charles B. Warring Magnet Academy	87	9	0	60	27	1	12
Gov. George Clinton Elementary School	82	10	0	58	31	1	10
S.F.B. Morse Young School	75	14	0	59	31	1	8
Poughkeepsie Middle School	68	14	0	62	23	1	15
Poughkeepsie High School	56	13	0	66	17	1	17
PCSD District	68	12	0	61	23	1	15

*Note.* From “Poughkeepsie City School District Report Card,” 2011-12, *New York State*

*Department of Education.*

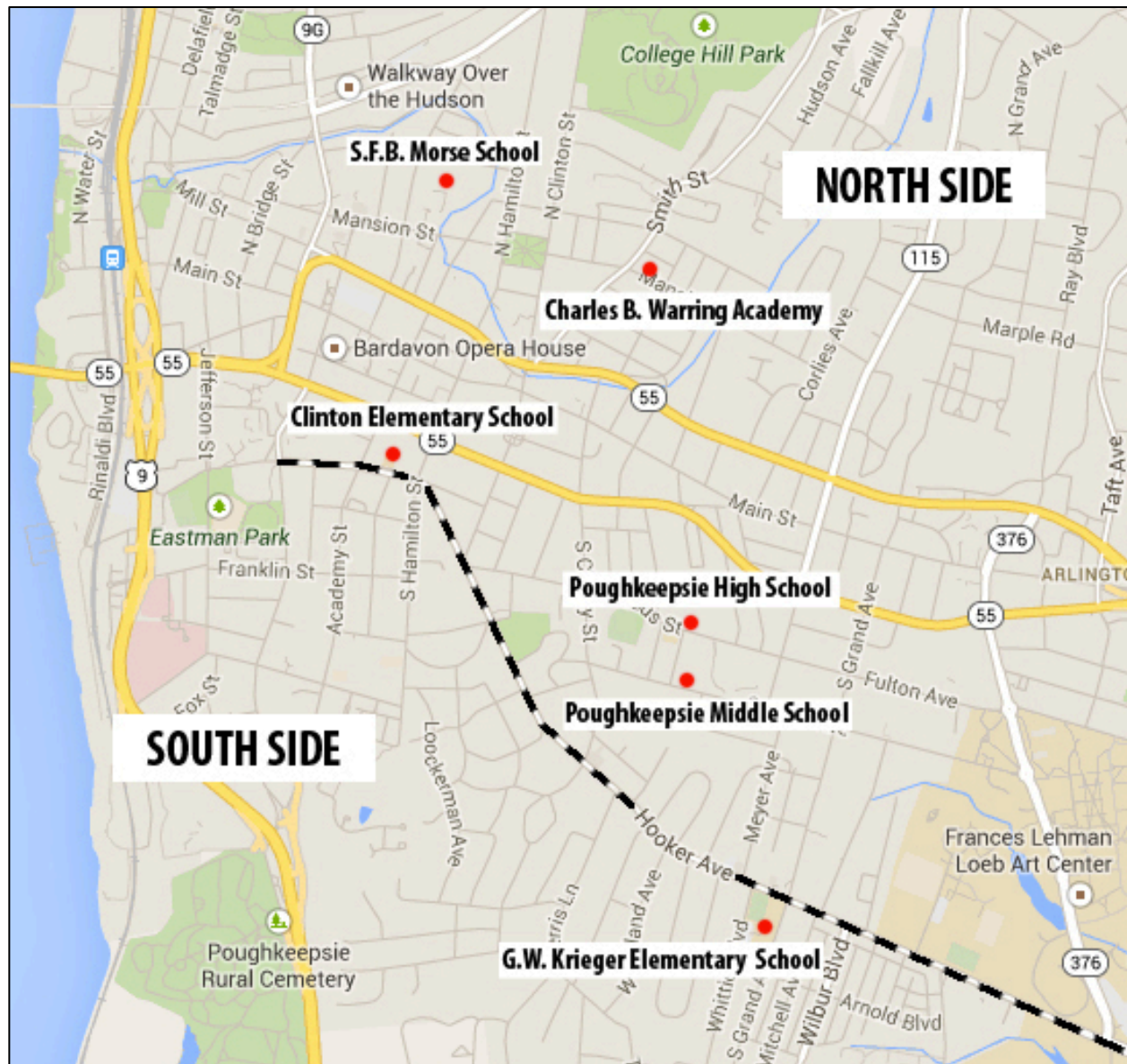


Figure 1. Map showing the locations of the traditional public schools in the Poughkeepsie City School District. Original Map.

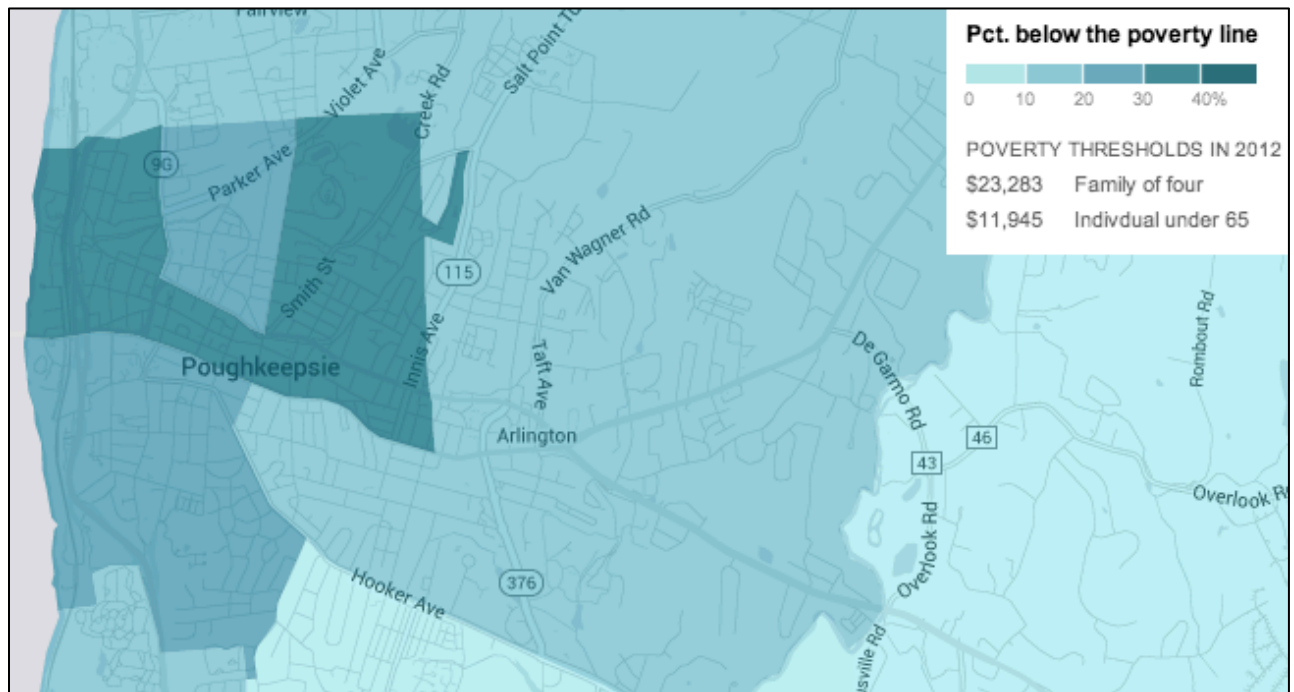
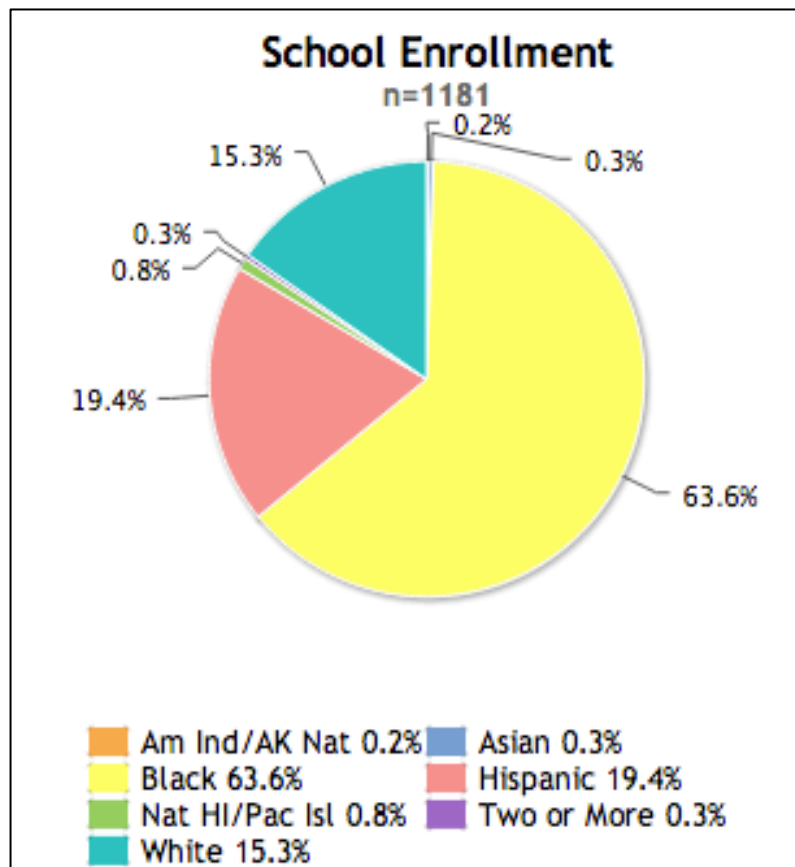
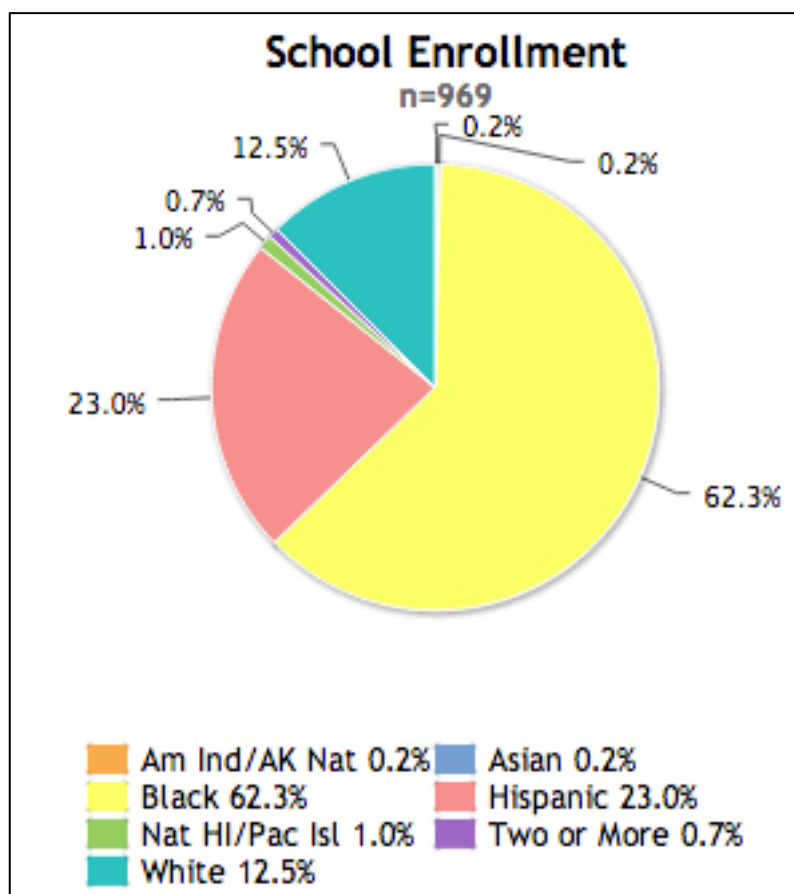


Figure 2. Map showing populations living below the poverty line in Poughkeepsie. From “Mapping Poverty in American,” 2014, *The New York Times*.

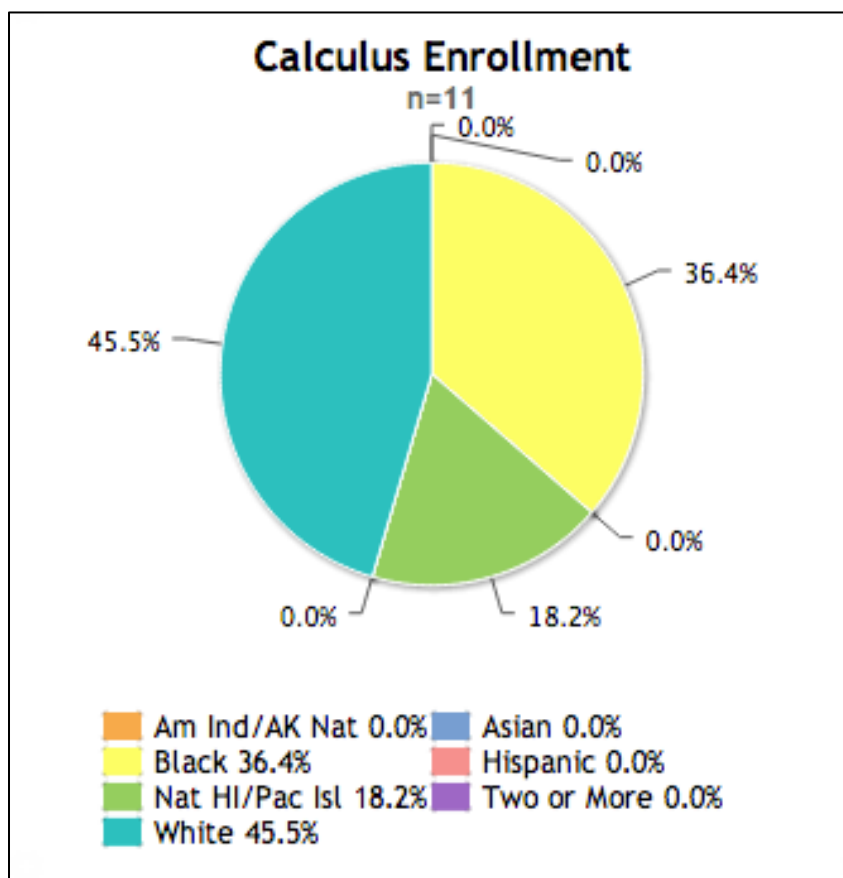


*Figure 3.* Racial/Ethnic demographic information of Poughkeepsie High School Students. From “Civil Rights Data Collection—Poughkeepsie High School,” 2011, *New York State Department of Education*.

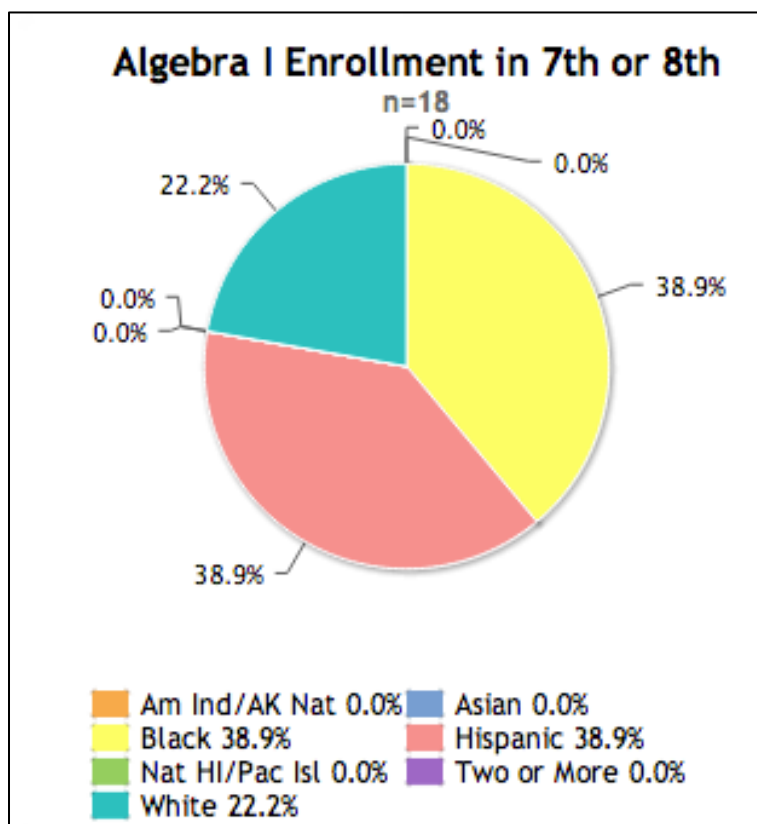


*Figure 4.* Racial/Ethnic demographic information of Poughkeepsie Middle School Students.

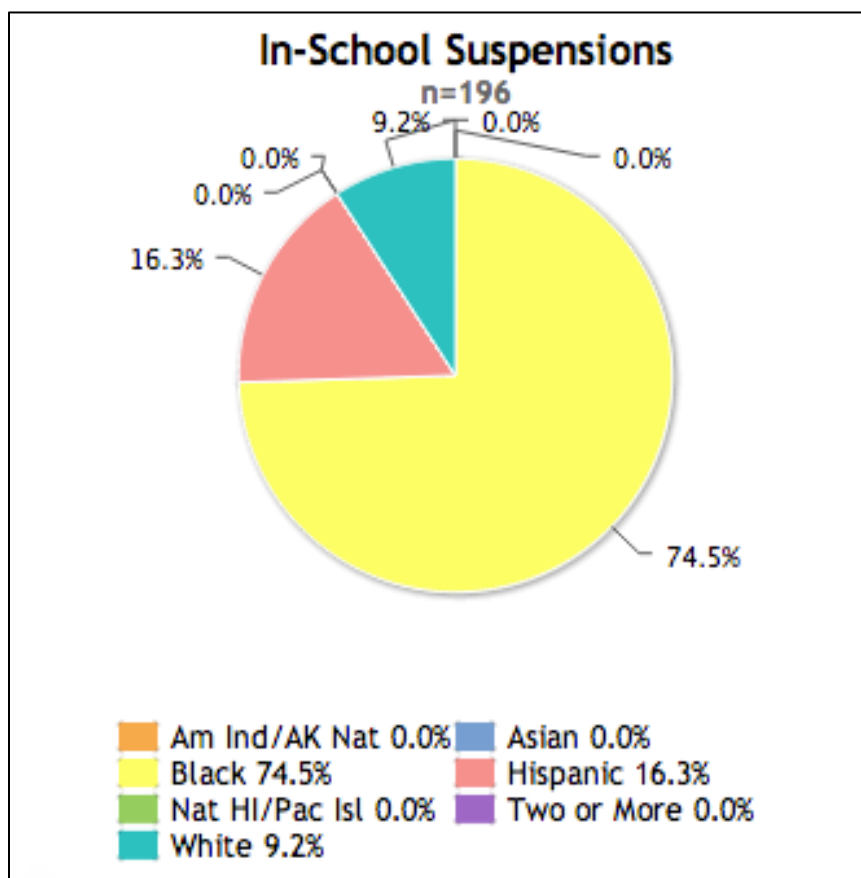
From “Civil Rights Data Collection—Poughkeepsie Middle School,” 2011, *New York State Department of Education*.



*Figure 5.* Racial/Ethnic demographic information of students enrolled in calculus courses at Poughkeepsie High School. From “Civil Rights Data Collection—Poughkeepsie High School,” 2011, *New York State Department of Education*.

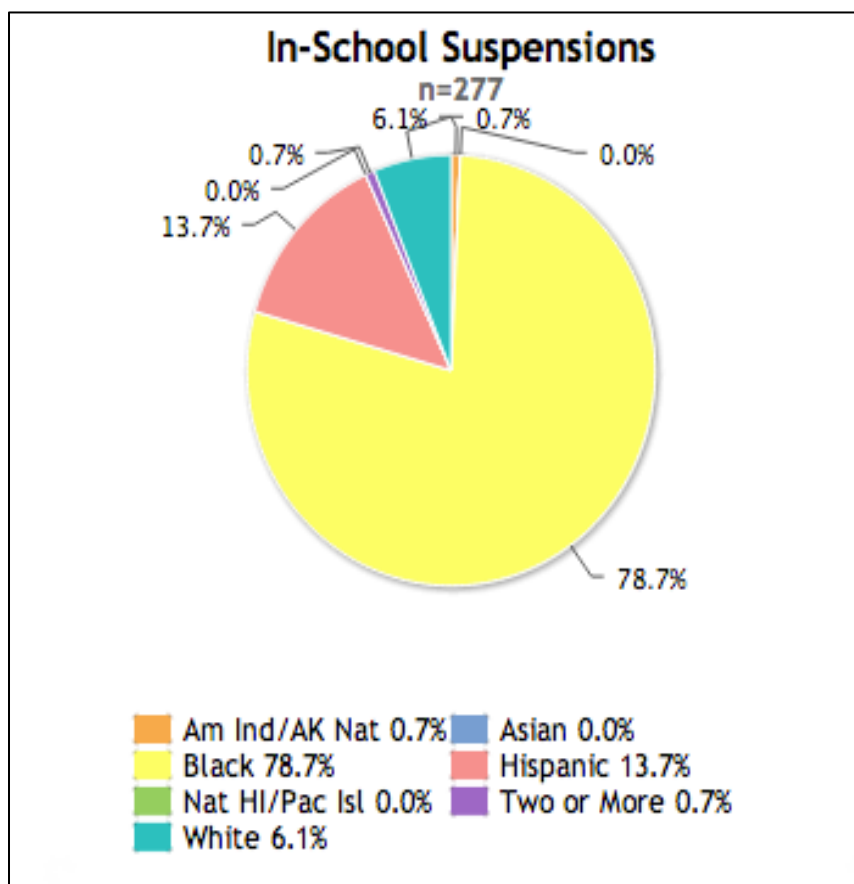


*Figure 6.* Racial/Ethnic demographic information of students enrolled in algebra I courses at Poughkeepsie Middle School. From “Civil Rights Data Collection—Poughkeepsie Middle School,” 2011, *New York State Department of Education*.



*Figure 7.* Racial/Ethnic demographic information of students who have received in-school suspension at Poughkeepsie High School. From “Civil Rights Data Collection—Poughkeepsie High School,” 2011, *New York State Department of Education*.





*Figure 8.* Racial/Ethnic demographic information of students who have received in-school suspension at Poughkeepsie Middle School. From “Civil Rights Data Collection—Poughkeepsie Middle School,” 2011, *New York State Department of Education*.

**NEW NEW  
PUBLIC SCHOOL OPTION  
FOR POUGHKEEPSIE STUDENTS  
GRADES K - 8**

**Come to a presentation  
about a ~~new~~ tuition free public charter school  
in the City of Poughkeepsie,  
to open September, 2013**

**Please come to this community forum  
for information.  
Ask your questions and make comments.**

**6-7 p.m. Thursday, June 28, 2012  
Family Partnership Center  
Lateef Islam Auditorium\*  
North Hamilton Street**

**\*this space is rented from Family Services**

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OPCIÓN DE ESCUELA PÚBLICA  
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POUGHKEEPSIE  
Grados K - 8**

**Ven a una presentación  
acerca de una nueva matrícula gratuita en las  
escuelas charter  
en la ciudad de Poughkeepsie,  
para septiembre de 2013**

**Por favor, venga a este foro de la comunidad  
para obtener información.  
Pregunte a sus preguntas y comentarios.**

**6-7 pm Jueves, 28 de junio 2012  
Family Partnership Center  
Lateef Islam Auditorio\*  
North Hamilton Street**

**\* este espacio se alquila  
a partir de Servicios para la Familia**

*Figure 10. Advertisements for a Four Pillars Charter School outreach forum held at the Family Partnership Center in June, 2012. From Four Pillars Charter School Application, 2012, New York State Education Department.*